

TOWARD A RECOVERY OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE LIFE
AND LEADERSHIP OF HOUSE OF PRAYER CONGREGATION

A Professional Project
presented to
the Faculty of the
Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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May 2008

ABSTRACT

Toward a Recovery of Spirituality in the life and

Leadership of House of Prayer Congregation

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In an age in which the church is facing more and more demands for physical and economic growth in order to maintain facilities and staff, the spirituality of the members has become less of a priority. This project looks at the spiritual crisis of a particular congregation and offers a specific course of action to enable members to increase their sense of spirituality and the presence of God within themselves.

It begins by looking at a brief historical perspective of spirituality and how the particular form of contemplative spirituality might be coupled with some of the meditative practices of Mahayana and Zen Buddhism to engage such a change in spiritual growth. A series of classes is outlined based upon the spiritual growth program of 'Renovare' created by Richard Foster along with several different methodologies of prayer. These classes were offered in a seven week course of study to two specific groups of participants with the result of more active congregational participation by a number of the participants.

It is the conviction of this project that the mainline denominational church needs to seek ways of nurturing her members spiritually in order to retain members and encourage younger participants. By looking at the process of contemplative spirituality it offers an approach to growth of leaders and members of the congregation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the faculty and staff of Claremont School of Theology for their direction and patient guidance during this long process. Especially do I want to thank my faculty advisors, Dr. Frank Rogers – who has been a guide for me since the first day I began this process – and Dr. Stephen Kim – who gave so much of his time and knowledge in the area of Eastern studies. These two men have been a blessing. I truly appreciate their encouragement and direction.

I also want to express my appreciation to the leadership and members of House of Prayer Lutheran Church for their patience with me while I attended classes and their participation in my work on Spirituality.

I especially offer my thanks to God for my wife, Gail, who has encouraged and strengthened me throughout this whole endeavor, and my children, Nathan and Allyson, who kept encouraging their dad to “go for it.” Without their confidence and words of encouragement, I would have probably given up long ago. Thank you!



CLAREMONT
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

This professional project, completed by

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has been presented to and accepted by the

Faculty of the Claremont School of Theology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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May 2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS –

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction	1
CHAPTER 2 – The Situation within the church	13
CHAPTER 3 - Toward a Lutheran understanding	21
CHAPTER 4- The search for spirituality.....	37
CHAPTER 5- Designing a program	57
CHAPTER 6 - The program in use	63
Spiritual Development – session one	63
Spiritual Development – the contemplative tradition	72
Spiritual Development – the social justice tradition	80
Spiritual Development – the evangelical tradition	89
Spiritual Development – the charismatic tradition	98
Spiritual Development – the holiness tradition	106
Spiritual Development – the Incarnational tradition.....	114
CHAPTER 7- Evaluation.....	123
CONCLUSION	127
APPENDIX	129
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	130

CHAPTER 1

The need for spiritual renewal in the Church

This project deals with the problem that congregations and church members have come to focus so much attention upon church growth, meeting of the financial needs of the congregation and serving as a social institution that they are losing their enthusiasm for mission as well as their sense of spirituality and the sense of experiencing the presence of God in their lives.

Importance of the Problem

Upon graduation from seminary and ordination, I entered ministry with a vibrant enthusiasm and a keen sense of Christ's presence in his church. I was convinced that I would be able to instill that enthusiasm into all of the members of the congregations I served. My first call was to a congregation in Gardena, California. It had an active attendance of about 50 people who were more interested in keeping their "fellowship" alive than in experiencing the Gospel.

During the first several months I set out to visit each household to find out what they saw as the future of the congregation and to allow them to vent their feelings about the church's historical perspective. It soon became clear that church growth was not the most viable option for this particular congregation – at least in their opinion. They were located in a community that was very strongly Japanese with a strong presence of Hispanics. They were not ready to reach out to those communities, so it would be necessary to try to re-activate the members who had ceased attending. After a lot of

encouragement and pleading with them we finally brought the attendance up to approximately 100 per Sunday. The spark of enthusiasm that I possessed when I left seminary was beginning to wane for me.

After about two and one-half years there I was called to Mesa, Arizona to begin a new mission in a rapidly growing community. My wife, infant son, and I leaped at the chance to renew our zeal for ministry. I began work in Mesa by knocking on doors and visiting prospective members. After about four months of “door-knocking” and “pavement pounding” we began worship with about 100 people. The spirit was alive and working and the church grew rapidly – despite the fact that we worshipped in a mortuary chapel. We later became partners with the United Presbyterian Church in Mesa and shared their facilities. The young congregation grew by leaps and bounds – far exceeding my expectations.

Soon we were into our first buildings and the congregation was nearly 1,200 strong. I was conducting three services each Sunday and I was exhilarated about the ministry that was happening, but I was literally worn down. There were many demands for my time and I did not know how to care for myself. In addition to the regular demands of ministry I also averaged about 50 weddings each year along with lots of baptisms, catechetical classes and a few funerals. We called two different associate pastors but for one reason or another their presence just seemed to create more work than help. Seminary had not prepared me to delegate or let go. This new congregation was my “baby” and I felt I knew what was best for her.

When I had served that congregation for about 11 years, I was given my first Sabbatical. That became for me one of the most difficult times I have ever experienced. I

was forced away from the “baby” I had brought into existence and had to leave her in the hands of someone else. However, during the Sabbatical I was able to do some guided spiritual retreats and I began to recover my own sense of spirituality. It soon became obvious to me that in order for me to grow spiritually and at the same time allow the congregation to grow in independence, we needed to separate. I needed to relax my dependency on the congregation and allow them to do the same from me, and so I filed my mobility request with the Synod, the local judicatory of the Lutheran Church.

I was called to a church in Escondido, California, in North San Diego County. This was a congregation that had experienced a succession of short-term pastors. I became the tenth pastor to serve them, in some capacity, in 30 years. It seemed apparent to me that they needed someone who would settle down with them and love them as well as give them a sense of stability. I have now been at this congregation almost 17 years. We have a wonderful loving relationship. However, I have recognized for some time that they have needed to grow spiritually as well as numerically.

For the past fifteen years, we have worked very hard to create an Hispanic Outreach into the community. We called an Hispanic Pastor and formed “One Congregation in Two Languages.” We have discovered that trying to assimilate two cultures is very difficult both spiritually and monetarily for the pastor and the congregation. Once again, we have found ourselves trying to keep ministry active without really growing spiritually. Even though I had learned some new techniques for ministry and gained knowledge about how to establish appropriate boundaries, It was not enough. My spirit was completely drained.

In 2002, twelve years into this call, I was granted another Sabbatical. I was able to put this time of sabbatical to good use by attending to my own spirituality. I connected with the work that the San Francisco Presbyterian Seminary had been doing in the field. Specifically, I was able to connect with Howard Rice, a leading teacher in the field of Spirituality. Rice has written a number of books on spirituality and the pastor as spiritual leader. That experience opened my mind to the concept that the church, particularly the Lutheran Church, has been negligent in leading people into spiritual growth.

Now having gotten into the study and practice of spirituality, I realize that the field is very large. There is a long history of spirituality within the Christian faith, but historically it has been primarily a practice of monasticism. More recently it has grown in the non-denominational congregations. In addition, almost every religion has some sense of spirituality and its adherents practice some form of individual growth. Recently, I have been focusing upon the practice of Buddhism and the Buddhists quest for Nirvana or “Nothingness.” This is a practice for individuals but I believe it offers some gifts to Christianity that could be put to good use.

There are particular expectations and demands that are placed upon pastors and congregations as far as numerical growth and financial stability are concerned, without vital and necessary structures for spiritual support to sustain them in ministry. It has been my experience that if the spiritual maturity is present, evangelism and financial security seem to become outgrowths of that maturity.

Thesis

This project proposes to enrich and revitalize the congregation, individuals and church leaders of House of Prayer Evangelical Lutheran Church through a series of activities

aimed at heightening the sense of their own spirituality by means of meditation, music, prayer, silence and directed study.

Definitions of Major Terms

Hesychism: The practice of repeating a word or phrase over and over as a kind of 'Mantra' to serve as a kind of prayer methodology.

Mindfulness: The practice proposed by Thich Nhat Hanh in which one is fully mindful of what one is doing at a particular time and eliminating all other thoughts or concerns from one's mind.

Monergism: The theology that declares that God has done everything necessary for the salvation of humankind. God does not depend upon any good works or right actions on the part of the person in order to effect salvation. God came in human form in the person of Jesus Christ to take the sins of humanity, and then gave us God's spirit to teach us right from wrong.

Spirituality: There are many understandings of spirituality throughout the religions of the world and even among Christians themselves. The term "Spirituality" as it will be primarily used in this document refers to Contemplative spirituality. It is manifested through prayer, contemplation, study, and the providing of "space" for God's Spirit to exist within one's life.

Work Previously Done in the Field

Morton T. Kelsey, in his book The Other Side of Silence, A Guide to Christian Meditation has suggested that there are specific methods of Christian meditation that can

be used to strengthen devotion and prayer methodology.¹ While some have put into practice the methods of Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation as well as Yoga, Christian meditation can offer a great deal to the Christian worshipper.

He also recommends the use of silence for the Christian as a means of listening to God rather than trying to force oneself into God's presence through prayer and petition.

Another very important work was done by Tilden Edwards in his book, Living in the Presence, Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Awareness of God.² The author offers some spiritual exercises which incorporate an awakening of the senses as well as some practical means of enlivening the spirit to acknowledge God's presence. His work is very practical offering means of exercising centering prayer and other methodologies.

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki in her book In God's Presence, Theological Reflections on Prayer, does some very good work on the concept of prayer.³ She speaks about the importance of one's image of God when one is praying. We tend to focus our prayers upon our understanding of God. Her work will be very important to me as I begin to look at types of prayers and how they form a focus for our study.

Scope and Limitations of the Project

This project is not intended to be a study of historical spirituality. However, some of the practices that have been used for many centuries as well as some of the leaders in

¹Morton T. Kelsey, The Other Side of Silence: A Guide to Christian Meditation (New York: Paulist Press, 1976).

² Tilden Edwards, Living In the Presence, Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Awareness of God ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

³Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1996).

the field will be discussed and offered as means of discovering one's own spirituality. This project is intended to offer a practical guide for one particular congregation and its lay persons to experience the will of God for them and hopefully the discernment God's presence in all aspects of their lives. I plan to offer some exercises that have proven successful for me as well as others, and that might be put into use for the reader on a daily basis. Since the understanding of spirituality is a process that is unveiled during extended use, I want to help the reader feel comfortable in placing them into a daily practice.

Procedure for Integration

I will conduct research and study about the subjects of spirituality and methods of church revitalization in the library and through internet searches. I will incorporate some of the methodologies of Thomas Merton and his research on the Inner Self and contemplative prayer. I would also incorporate some of the meditation practices of Buddhism offered by Thich Nhat Hanh and D.T. Suzuki, the leading authority on Zen Buddhism. By incorporating these and some of the methodologies of classical Spirituality, I will be able to offer some of those practices for the laity of the congregation and participating individuals in ways of strengthening their own sense of God's presence in their lives.

I will begin by developing at least two small groups (6-8) of selected lay individuals beginning in September, 2007 for the purpose of studying, sharing, and examining various forms of prayer, meditation, and Bible Study for a 6-8 week study. These groups would represent diverse areas of ministry within the congregation. One group would represent some of our younger families who have small children and who

bring with them their own unique needs and concerns. This group would most likely need to meet during the evening to accommodate working schedules.

The other group would represent some of the older members of the congregation, most of whom are retired and who could meet during the day. This group would be drawn from those who have established a practice of Bible study and a long time commitment to their church. These two representative groups would give me an opportunity to try a variety of techniques of study and prayer. The experiences in these groups should give me a broad spectrum from which to draw conclusions. We would also use various kinds of music within the groups for the purpose of meditation and prayer.

The groups would meet weekly beginning with a “check-in” of concerns that might be lifted in prayer. We would examine various forms of prayer and Bible study as well as allow time for personal reflection. I would also introduce the value of journaling for the participants. As they become more comfortable with writing and with one another, I may ask them if they would be willing to share any discoveries they have made in their personal time. This would likely open the possibilities of other discussion. I intend to ask them to study a particular prayer style each week and practice putting it into use. I will use some available resources for this practice – two of which are Michael Gemignani’s To Know God: Small Group Exercises for Spiritual Formation⁴ and Bradley P. Holt’s Thirsty for God, A brief History of Christian Spirituality.

I plan to develop a survey that can be used within the groups regarding their understanding of God and God’s activity within their lives. This will give me a sense of

⁴Michael Gemignani, To Know God: Small Group Exercises for Spiritual Formation (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001); Bradley P. Holt, Thirsty for God, A Brief History of Christian Spirituality (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

the direction that needs to be covered for each group. This survey can also be used as a kind of “Measuring device” for checking on the progress we have made.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2: The Situation within the Church:

There is a spiritual crisis that faces the mainline denominational church and her laity. Her people are yearning for something that the church has overlooked. People see the importance of worship on a regular basis but that worship experience often does not fulfill the personal needs of the worshipper. One result of this dissatisfaction is a sense of denominational flight. The desire to connect with a renewing spirit has led people to search for it wherever they feel it can be found.

Chapter 3: Toward a Lutheran Perspective:

This chapter will look at the life and theology of Martin Luther and the movement from the Catholic Church to the beginnings of the Protestant Church. We will then look at the development of Martin Luther’s theology of Justification by Grace through faith and his sense of spirituality that has come down to the church.

Chapter 4: The Contemplative Practice

Here we will begin by looking at the practice of contemplative spirituality as used throughout the history of the Christian Church and the understandings of Thomas Merton. Then we will move toward a look at the practices of meditation and mindfulness training offered by leaders within the Buddhist community – especially Thich Nhat Hanh and D.T. Suzuki. We will then move to look at the comparison of some of the Christian and Buddhist practices.

Chapter 5: Creating a program for a congregation:

We will look at some of the work that has been done in the field by others considering what will be of value and how to adapt it to make it work in a local contemporary setting. We will look at the rationalization for the choosing of the 'Renovare' program created by Richard Foster.

Chapter 6: Designing a program for House of Prayer Lutheran Church:

What will a program of spiritual development look like when aimed at a local congregation? It will begin with small group studies which will include the elements of Bible study, meditation, various prayer methods, music and the use of silence. Much of this might be unfamiliar to some within the traditional church. What resources might be available for use here?

Chapter 7: How did it work in local use? Evaluation and Conclusions

How did the participants and congregation feel about a study on spirituality and spiritual development? Were there any dynamics that transferred from individuals to congregational level? In what areas do we need to work further? What was good and what needs to be changed?

Chapter 2

The Situation within the Church

During the past twenty-five years the church, especially those of the major mainline denominations, has undergone tremendous change. Historically the church could count on denominational loyalty to sustain membership numbers. The children of members who often drifted away following the Rite of Confirmation and the leaving for college would return when they got married and started their own families. They were rooted in the church and despite the turning away for a period of time in their lives, there was a strength that could be found in the institutional church that could not be found elsewhere. As a result, their returning to the church to offer to their children what they themselves had received sustained the church from one generation to another.

There was also a strong sense of denominational loyalty among those who had grown up in a particular denomination and, following a move to another part of the country, they would often seek out a church of the same denomination and become members there.

That has not been the case for the past two generations. There are several reasons for this dramatic change. First, there is the mobility factor. Due in part to employment opportunities, diverse housing markets, and career choices, people are moving farther and farther away from what was considered “home base”. No longer do young people have a sense of regional loyalty.¹ These young people move to where jobs are located and housing is affordable. They have no hesitancy traveling to visit family.

¹Kent W. Gilbert, Commitment to Unity: A History of the Lutheran Church in America (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 1988), 417.

Second, there is the factor of the questioning of authority on many levels.

The rules that were established by our parents and grandparents are not unconditionally accepted by younger generations. Some of this questioning of authority is for good reason, but other questioning has grown out of changes in what we understood as moral issues. Robert Wuthnow, in his book, After the Baby Boomers, says this issue began with the baby boomers – those born between 1947 and 1962 – and has continued through the generations defined as Generations “X” and “Y.”² The results of these beginnings of dissatisfaction have had long lasting effects upon the church.

Third, the church itself has undergone a great deal of turmoil in struggling with questions of faith. Archaeological research has raised questions in areas that were at one time considered “untouchable”. In addition, the church has undergone struggles with the questions of ordaining persons of alternative lifestyles, as well as acknowledging those pastors who have not lived faithfully to the standards to which they were committed at ordination. There have been numerous instances of a pastor’s “humanity” showing forth and they have been guilty of divorce, malfeasance, and sometimes abuse, especially sexual abuse, and the taking advantage of their esteemed office.

Fourth, there is the educational factor. In previous generations, the pastor was viewed as one of the most educated members of the community; often being one of the few with college and post-graduate degrees. The pastor today, while trained in a specifically theological background, is one among many with college and professional training. Additionally some pastors serving churches today do not have theological training at all beyond graduating from a Bible college. The pastor is often not as

² Robert Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty – and Thirty – Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 2.

technologically well trained as many with whom he or she is called to serve. The computer and cyberspace have challenged the pastor and the church with questions for which there are no easy answers.

Fifth, the Biblical assertions that were once taken by an affirmation of faith are being challenged on many fronts. We have a much broader view of creation and the universe than can be logically explained by biblical tenets. The Internet and the media have encouraged us to ask difficult questions and to seek answers outside biblical injunctions.

Additionally, the world is our playground. Travel has become far easier and more advanced – opening us to a greater understanding of other world religions. Christianity is no longer viewed as the primary world religion. We watch other world religions as they grow exponentially. We have had to admit that Islam is one of the most rapidly growing religions in our world today. Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and many other religions now offer aspects of their practice that have become very inviting to those seeking a sense of individual spiritual growth.

There is little tolerance for non-acceptance of others and their spiritual journeys. The denominational churches – particularly the protestant churches - that have been a major spiritual influence for the past 500 years have been struggling in the face of this dynamic of decreasing membership. Unlike the Catholic Church which seems to have a more powerful grasp upon its membership, the Protestant Church has watched people move from one branch to another and especially to non-denominational churches.

Efforts have been put forth to form partnerships and unions with particular branches of denominations and great efforts have been exerted toward looking at the

theologies that are shared in common as opposed to those that separate. Specifically, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was formed in 1988 with the union of three branches of Lutheranism – the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.³ However, an interesting aspect of this union was that the new church did not equal in numbers the summation of the parts. There remained some dissention among individual congregations of those who were coming together. The ELCA has since formed partnerships with the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church and has also been in dialog with the Roman Catholic Church especially regarding the study of the use of the means of grace. All of this and much more have shaken the foundation of the Church.

With all of these variables as well as the diversification within the laity there has arisen a sense of dissatisfaction. No longer are worshipers finding contentment with liturgy and hymnody that has been passed down from generation to generation. Younger church members have a desire for music and worship styles that conform more concisely into their life styles. They seem to demand music and worship styles that are more simplistic, repetitive in lyrics, and emotionally moving. While traditional hymnody has good theology, it is not held in high regard by younger worshippers. It has been a fact that most Christians retain more of the church's theology from the hymns that are sung than from the sermons that they hear. The songs go with them throughout the week.

In previous generations worshippers viewed worship as a time of thanksgiving, adoration and praise of God; today the theme seems to focus around "What is in it for

³ Ibid., 526.

me?” As a result, traditional worship for many young people has become empty, boring, and void of excitement.⁴

Since the mid 1950s and particularly since the mid 1960s with the advent of congregations such as Calvary Chapel and the rise of many non-denominational churches, independence has become a theme of these rapidly growing congregations. Young couples are particularly attracted to these congregations and their contemporary worship styles.

Church members desire to feel that they have a more “hands-on” approach to mission outreach. Funding for such outreach is not sent to a denominational level for distribution, but is sent directly from congregations to those in need with responses from recipients directly relating to the givers. We have witnessed this in recent disasters such as the devastation in Indonesia following the tidal wave in December 2004 and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. We have seen this same scenario happening in emergency relief efforts following the fires in Southern California in 2007 and around the country and the world. By giving directly to areas of need, individuals tend to believe that they have more control over what happens to their gifts. They can, in effect, “bypass” some of the institutional controls not only of denominational judicatories but also governmental agencies.

While the church has experienced a decline in membership, those who are leaving are still seeking a relationship with God. They desire a more personal intimate relationship with God than they have experienced through the corporate and liturgical setting. When Jesus’ disciples witnessed his going away by himself, away from the crowds, early in the morning to pray they realized that Jesus had a relationship with the Father that they

⁴ Ibid., 429.

lacked. So the disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray...” (Luke 11:1b). I believe that same personal dynamic is at play in the worshippers of today.

Wuthnow says “We piece together our thoughts about religion and our interests in spirituality from the materials at hand”⁵ The young people look for what their parents possessed as far as faith is concerned but they are not satisfied with the form in which it comes. They want what works best for themselves. In addition they seem to want a faith that is more directly connected with their everyday life. Jesus is not so much God in human form - dying on the cross for them - as he is a friend with whom they can relate daily.

In many instances traditional churches have given way to “worship centers” that are adorned very comfortably with movable chairs rather than pews. Altars have been replaced by communion tables – or completely missing. There may or may not be a cross somewhere in the facility, but it is not usually centrally located. Choirs and organs have given way to song leaders, overhead projectors, keyboards and guitars.

In an effort to discover this desired intimacy the worshippers are turning also to religious methodologies that have proven successful for hundreds of years – spirituality – practiced by meditation, prayer, silence, and intimacy with God’s word. While this can be seen as a very healthy movement, the aspect of fellowship with other Christians must not be over looked. It is within this fellowship that one finds strength, support and partnership in the Gospel as well as help in facing the pressures of living day by day. These young

⁵Ibid., 14

Christians want to be with others who recognize their own struggles. The church, therefore, needs to learn ways of incorporating a sense of spirituality and vibrancy into its fellowship and worship.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk who received a great deal of recognition during the Viet Nam War and who has established a special Buddhist Monastery in France, declared that “a tree without roots cannot survive.”⁶ Neither can a person without roots survive. When Hanh invites people to his Plum Village for retreats or for their own sense of escape, he tells them that they must go back to their roots in order to be fulfilled.⁷ The same is true for those who have left the church for various reasons. They need to return to the church that nurtured them in order to find themselves.

With the many challenges facing the church today the struggle has become, in many instances, one of survival. As the main line Protestant church, especially in Southern California, sees members dying or moving away as they age, there is the persistent struggle to bring in new members and sustain the demands of ever-increasing budgets.

As a result many of the lay people as well as the leaders become discouraged and “burned out”. There are too many demands placed upon them for sustaining a struggling institution. For these reasons as well as for the need for spiritual enlightenment the church needs a renewal of spirituality. God’s Holy Spirit given through Jesus Christ never departed the church but it sometimes gets shoved out of the way for seemingly more pressing matters.

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 183.

⁷ Ibid., 183.

The Church is the Body of Christ reflecting the mystery of God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We who are members are called to be reflections of that loving relationship initiated by God.⁸

The Church has undergone many changes in her history. Over the years there have been numerous swings of the pendulum from one side to the other. We have seen the church move from highly liturgical to completely non-liturgical, to contemporary, back to liturgical with modifications. The faith of the worshipper has not been at the core of the issue; instead it has been a question of “how” we worship, how we understand God, and what seems most comfortable for the youngest generations. Their sense of spirituality is expressed in many ways and fortunately we believe that God is present in all of those ways of worship. We need to find ways in which these people are made to feel comfortable in the church of their parents. However, in many instances this might take a long time.

⁸ Michael Downey, Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 79.

Chapter 3

Toward a Lutheran Understanding

Dissatisfaction by those within the Church is not a new concept. When the leaders of the church become complacent and are determined that there is only one way to come into relationship with God, there has been dissention. This has been a concern throughout the history of the church.

By the beginnings of the sixteenth century the monastic movement was well established within the church. The Catholic Church was the only church representing the Christian faith and those who saw themselves as Christians, were necessarily a part of it. It is from this monastic mentality and its practice that we meet Martin Luther, one of the key figures within the development of the modern Christian Church. It is from Luther's understandings of the Grace of God that the Protestant Church arose. His teachings took the doctrines of the Bible – here-to-fore a possession of the Church – and placed them into the hands of the general population, at least to those who could read.

In an effort to gain an understanding of a sense of Lutheran Spirituality we must go back to the one who gave rise to a Lutheran theology. This brief summary of Martin Luther's life is not intended to be complete, but to lay the foundation for his spirituality.

Martin Luther, son of peasant parents Hans and Margareta Luder (as it was pronounced in German), has been called both a bane and blessing to the church and to the world during the time we call the enlightenment era of the Medieval period. He was born on November 10th, 1483 in the town of Eisleben, Germany. That very day, on the Feast of St. Martin, his father took him to the church to be baptized. According to common custom his parents named the child in commemoration of the Saint whose feast was being

celebrated, Martin. In a period of financial insecurity and desperate times, his father took at job as a miner in the copper mines in Mansfeld, Germany.

Martin lived in a time that was very tenuous as far as security of any kind was concerned, but his father was determined that his children would receive the best education he could offer. He was determined that his son would not be relegated to the mines, so he sent Martin and his siblings for education at the local school, then to Magdeburg, then on to the University of Erfurt.

Martin grew up in the time of the Renaissance. Among his extraordinary contemporaries were the likes of Machiavilli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Erasmus and Thomas More. When Martin was in grammar school Christopher Columbus set sail in search for the new world, so the world was beginning to open up as never before.

Martin's father knew that an education opened up the only possibilities available for young men at that time. Aside from the general education he received in the local schools, he found a teacher in Eisenach who both challenged him and awakened his creativity. He became a talented musician and composer which he would later use in writing and transposing his hymns.

Despite his education, there was nothing that particularly distinguished Martin from his contemporaries. He was diligent in his practice of his Catholic faith but he did not particularly think about it or try to understand it.¹

The religion practiced at that time was one of trying to gain spiritual security. Since the church taught that salvation was something to be earned by good works,

¹ James M. Kittelson, Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 37.

it was not uncommon for people to go on holy pilgrimages in order to earn merits for their relationship to a harsh God who would stand in judgment of them. In addition, since saints and relics were to be adored, churches collected pieces of bone and hair that were alleged to come from the saints, so people would make holy pilgrimages to honor these relics. Homage to these relics could reduce the time in purgatory by many years. Christ was pictured not only on the cross but seated on the throne of judgment. Therefore, mankind's lot was to strive to do everything within his power to please God. Confession and penance were a prominent part of Luther's spiritual life.²

Life at the University of Erfurt was rigorous. Each day began at 4:00 A.M. with worship and prayers. Students ate meals together, participated in specific religious curricula and studied the same subjects. Luther loved this time at the university and was challenged by it. He earned his degree in one year and in the minimum time allotted for such a study, earned his Master's Degree in 1505 at the age of 22. The world of education was opening up for Luther. He could now study among the professional faculty at the University moving toward a degree in law. His father was so convinced that his son would pursue a law degree that he presented him with a copy of *Corpus Juris Civilis*. With this law background, he could provide for his parents and perhaps help his siblings.

Soon thereafter however, Luther was walking from Mansfeld to Erfurt when he encountered a lightening storm. He was struck to the ground by a bolt of lightening. In his fear he prayed to St. Anne, "Help me, Saint Anne and I will become a monk". His father was furious at this promise because by that decision his old age "insurance" had been

² Ibid., 40

negated. Young Luther was convinced this was God's call to him. Just a week later he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt.³

Like others who went before him, Luther struggled with how one could become worthy to stand before the judgment of God and how one could receive God's grace. He spent his first couple of years at the monastery striving to find a way of becoming worthy of God's grace. He spent hours in prayer, made pilgrimages, and made every effort to become worthy. The futility of these efforts caused Luther to hate God for giving humans a task that was impossible to accomplish.

When he was ordained a priest and was ready to celebrate his first mass, it was such an overwhelming responsibility that he trembled at the prospect.⁴ Luther felt so unworthy of God that he constantly sought out fellow monks to hear his confession – often confessing trivial offenses.

Scholars have referred to the "Tower Experience" of Luther that took place while he was studying in the tower at the monastery in Wittenburg. It was there that he came to a new understanding of the Gospel. Here he describes a recovery of the Biblical meaning of righteousness of God. While the Medieval church had defined the righteousness of God as the justice God demanded, Luther came to understand it as the Mercy of God.⁵ The church described man as standing before God based upon a series of good works, good intentions and depending therefore upon God's grace to look favorably upon the works that were done.

³ John Dillenberger, ed., Martin Luther: Selections from His writings (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1961) xiv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii.

Luther came to understand that man stood before God's grace through the death and resurrection of Christ. Man has no part in his righteousness before God. Instead he is redeemed by God's grace alone through faith in Christ.

By the time of Martin Luther's posting of his 95 Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenburg on October 31, 1517, he was opening a series of discussions that were not completely defined, but would be so in the dialog and arguments that would follow. In order to initiate debate, the Theses were written in Latin so that only the professors and priests could be able to understand them. However, instead of offering the possibility of a scholarly debate as Luther had hoped, the theses were translated into German and widely dispersed thanks also to the invention of the Guttenberg press.⁶ This set off a great deal of distrust and unrest within the Catholic Church.

When Pope Leo X first received a copy of the Thesis he tried to down-play their importance but unrest within the country and support for Luther, especially Luther's attacks on the power attributed to the papacy, forced the issue into prominence. Luther was summoned to appear before Rome. Elector Frederick, the ruler of the territory in which Luther lived, applied pressure upon Rome to have the hearing in Germany rather than Rome. Therefore, Luther appeared before the Diet at Augsburg, but no decisions were made at that appearance. However, changes were being made within the Catholic

⁶ Herman J. Selderhuis, "The Protestant Tradition in Europe," in The Story of Christian 2001). Spirituality: Two thousand years from East to West ed. Gordon Mursell (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, p. 171.

Church. The Pope encouraged the Vatican to get rid of some of the problems around the sale of indulgences, an accomplishment from which both sides claimed victory.

Luther continued to develop his understanding of faith and in 1521 he was summoned to the Imperial Diet at Worms. Here he was to answer charges centering around his contentions regarding the infallibility of the Pope and the fact that the Pope was the only one who could interpret scripture. Luther's contention was that the norm of the church could only come from scripture therefore the pope could not be the only one to interpret them.

At this Diet of Worms Luther was commanded to retract his statements and return to the teachings of the church as well as restore all dignity to the pope. It is here that Luther responded in his famous words:

Since then your serene Majesty and your Lordship seeks a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed. Unless I am convinced by the teaching of the scripture or by clear reason (for I do not trust in either the Pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience." Then he added, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."⁷

Immediately following the Diet, Luther was taken into protective custody and housed in the Wartburg Castle. It was there that he began the arduous task of translating the scriptures into the German language.

In addition to Luther's struggle with the Catholic Church's stance that Monasticism is the purist form of Christianity, he also contended that God's word was intended for all people.⁸ Luther held also that mankind was both saint and sinner at the same time.

⁷ Kittleson, Luther the Reformer 161.

⁸ Ibid., 171.

Because he was born in sin and could not escape the human condition, he was a sinner; but because of the redemption of Christ, he was also saint. His theology was based upon the writings of the Apostle Paul when he claimed that saints were all those for whom Christ died.

According to Bengt Hoffman in his essay “Lutheran Spirituality” in Exploring Christian Spirituality⁹ Luther’s theology gave rise to two ways of understanding *kerygma*. One translation has been called “Lutheran Orthodoxy” which dealt with the theme of justification by faith from the dogmatic theologizing point of view. The other tradition came to be known as “Lutheran Pietism”, in which the theme of Justification was dealt with from a more personal pietistic point of view.¹⁰

By the time of the Reformation Luther had moved away from that pietistic point of view so prominent in the monastic life. Since salvation was a free gift from a loving God, neither dependent upon the pietistic acts of contrition nor good works, his understanding was that good acts grew out of the salvatory promise made perfect in Christ. Righteousness is not accomplished by man but bestowed by God.¹¹

I grew up as a Lutheran in a family that was very active in the church. Therefore I was very active in all the activities of the church, participating in all the educational opportunities the church afforded. As a result, I was steeped in the understanding of God as “prime mover”. God acted in creation to bring the world and people into existence and

⁹Bengt Hoffman, “Lutheran Spirituality,” in Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader ed. Kenneth J Collins (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 122

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹¹ Philip Sheldrake, Spirituality and History (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 210.

into relationship with God. God acted through the prophets to keep people in that relationship, and ultimately God acted in Christ to enter into humanity to become one of us so that we might learn through God's personal witness of God's love and acceptance. Then finally, in the gift of the Holy Spirit to each one of us – first of all at Pentecost and then through the sacrament of Holy Baptism, God has done all that is necessary for our salvation. The believer contributes only faith.

It is this theology that I have taught and preached over the past 30 plus years. God has done all for us. The term “divine monergism” used by Sheldrake is the perfect summation of this concept.¹² It truly represents the Lutheran understanding of God's great love for God's people.

The Holy Spirit is present and works his gifts in us. A gift, yes, for the Holy Spirit himself is at work in us. Since I am indeed justified, I know that my sins are forgiven without my merit. But then it is of this essence that I begin to feel (sensitive) so that I may in some manner understand.¹³

Luther claimed that since we cannot see God face to face – though we see God's work in creation and in the people God has given us to love and serve – we must learn to see God through the “eyes of the soul”. God does not come to us in face-to-face encounters, but in the love by which God fills our hearts.

When I have taught confirmation, Sunday school, Bible studies as well as in my preaching, I have proclaimed this concept of God's having done everything for us. Since God has revealed God's self in these three natures, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all we need to do is place our trust and faith in God.

¹² Ibid., 123.

¹³ Ibid., 123.

That does not mean that this is a simplistic view. To be really honest, placing faith in God's action as a gift of grace is not an easy thing to do – especially for us who are Americans. We tend to see ourselves – rightly or wrongly – as “givers”. We pride ourselves on giving aid and support to many nations of the world – especially to those we consider to be part of the third world countries.

Even following periods of war we have gone to the aid of the defeated countries and helped them rebuild their buildings and their economies and then offered them the hands of friendship in trade and commerce to help them get re-established. So with this mentality, we tend to find it difficult to accept God's love as grace – a free undeserved gift.

The concept of Justification by Grace through faith is a key component of Luther's theology that went contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. It is important to understand that there were many things about the Catholic Church that Luther loved – the Mass, the sign of the cross, the sacraments as well as honoring of the saints. It is also important that we understand that when Luther posted his 95 theses on the Castle Church door, he was not seeking to undermine the Catholic Church. It was his church. It had given him his faith. While there were many things in which he was in disagreement, he was attempting to call attention to abuses that were taking place among the clergy and within the papacy. He certainly did not set out to be excommunicated from the church. In his prologue to The Freedom of a Christian, he wrote a letter in which he addressed Pope Leo X advising him that he was not against Leo himself, but those who surrounded him.¹⁴

¹⁴ Dillenberger, Freedom of A Christian, 43-52.

“...Luther was about the business of translating into meaningful theological language a radical spiritual experience of Christ’s justifying and loving presence.”¹⁵

Additionally, Luther would not have felt comfortable with the concept of the mystics. Mystics often meditated upon the need for the person to move himself beyond the physical in order to meet God and commune with God on a mystical level. Luther seemed to speak of the mystical as God’s “invisible” presence. His understanding of the *invisible* was that faith moves us beyond what we can see and touch in the physical world and even beyond logic to an inner experience of God. That is the very nature of faith – faith is the “knowledge” of that which is unseen.¹⁶ Someone described faith one time as walking to the edge of the darkness and taking one more step. Faith comes into fruition completely when empirical knowledge ends. Luther was sure that Christ knows us and loves us even while he is invisible from us.

As Lutheran Christians we place a lot of emphasis upon the Word (Logos) of God. That Word was present from the very beginning of creation. God’s Word was there as the Spirit of God moved across the face of the deep (Gen. 1:2). God spoke and the world came into being – whether that creation took 6 days or millions of years – it happened through a Divine plan – God was in charge. Then that Logos became flesh according to John’s Gospel in the physical presence of Christ.

“The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies... Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Collins, 127.

¹⁶ Ibid., 128.

¹⁷ Dillenberger, Freedom of A Christian, 55.

One of the spiritual concepts that I particularly appreciate of Luther is that we who call ourselves Christians are “beggars”. We hold our hands out to receive the body of Christ and the Grace of God in much the same way a beggar opens his hands to receive a morsel of bread or an offering.

When we receive the sacrament of Holy Communion we are encouraged to open our hands fully so that we can freely receive the gift of God in Christ. When Christ offers himself to us we should be ready and willing to fully receive his presence. Many times I have encouraged this same theology in the marriage service. When a couple is about to exchange rings, I encourage them to place the ring up to the knuckle of the one receiving it – so that the receiver can place the ring over his or her own knuckle and onto the finger. Therefore, there is a giving and receiving of the gift. With those rings come the promise of commitment, honor, and the visible sign of holy marriage. But it takes both of them to make that gift complete – there is one who offers the gift and the one who receives it.

When we receive the Sacrament of the Altar, Christ offers the gift of his forgiveness, new life, and the promise of eternal life. The believer then opens his or her hands fully to receive these gifts.

My personal spirituality is based upon the theology that Paul expressed and Luther developed. God desires to have a relationship with all of God’s people. God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and entered into our world to walk among us and show us how to live in relationship to God and to one another. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus all of the sins of all humanity for all time have been atoned. We do not have to live in either a mystical or monastic life style to experience that forgiveness. It is our free

gift from a loving and forgiving God. A great deal of prayer is spent in contemplating this free gift.

I am convinced that all people who love God search for ways to make that relationship as real as possible. Spirituality is the search for that relationship. In our striving for that relationship with Christ, we do so in relationship to all whom God has given us to love. We serve them as an act of love in Christ. Martin Luther, in his treatise, "The Freedom of a Christian," proclaimed, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all... Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is love."¹⁸

We need to acknowledge here that Martin Luther did not deliberately turn away from the understanding of God as witnessed by the Catholic Church. It had failed him. Rather, he was pulled away by the longing in the spirit for a relationship with God that he could not attain by his own actions. Luther came to realize that God was present everywhere in the person and the spirit of Christ and in the Holy Spirit. The longing for a sense of holiness could not be attained by human effort, but it did not need to be; God had given it freely through God's grace (John 3:16-17).¹⁹ Mankind was made holy by God's grace alone – God's free undeserved gift. When this discovery was made Luther felt compelled to share that news with others who felt as helpless as he.

Mankind's understanding of God was not through intellectual achievement but through the emptying of oneself into the being of Christ and subsequently being filled by him.¹⁹ Lutheran theologians spoke of Christ *for* us - Christ emptying himself of his

¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹ Collins, 123.

heavenly nature in order to walk among mankind and draw man to himself. At the same time they also spoke of Christ *in* us as filling us with his mystical presence.

Luther's concept of God's grace stood in stark contrast to the "works righteousness" understanding prevalent at that time within the Catholic Church. It moved the quest for God's presence out of the hands of the monastic orders and into the realm of possibility for all believers.

Luther's contention was that God desired a relationship with those humans God had created. God was seen as a God of love who is active in the creation and not aloof from it. His spirituality, while steering clear of being labeled a form of mysticism, was indeed mystical in the understanding of the "invisible Christ". Collins says, "faith always moves into dimensions not approachable by reason and logic but available to inner experience. Like the mystics, he assumes the reality of a supernatural or supernormal realm."²⁰

Proof of this was in Luther's meditation on the Hebrews 11:1 where the writer of Hebrews speaks of faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." While the historical Jesus was a reality – one who entered the world as a human and walked among us, following the resurrection Christ became the presence of the mystical Lord.²¹ He was invisibly present – a concept he carried into his understanding of Holy Communion. In Christ, God chose to enter humanity in order to both give the example to follow and to prove God's great love. God's love is so overwhelming that God would chose to become one of us and take our sins upon himself.

²⁰ Ibid., 128.

²¹ Ibid., 128.

So what about the human experience in this? Humans have always desired a relationship with the Divine as is evidenced in both the Old and New Testaments. There was always the concept that the creator was far greater than the created, therefore, the created sought to please the creator and have a relationship with him. We see this in pre-biblical literatures as well as in the “J”, “E”, “P” and “D” traditions.

Following the pilgrimage of Christ on earth, we find an even greater sense of desire for oneness with Christ as Jesus boldly declared God’s great love for humanity. Mystics and spiritualists emptied themselves in order to attempt to fulfill that relationship. Thus the quest for greater understanding and one-ness with Christ became life-long quests. Through the theology of Monergism coming into use during the period of the Reformation, there was the possibility of righteousness available through faith alone, apart from works. God accomplished everything for us.

The process of defining this for Luther began with his study of the scriptures, thus opening God’s grace to all people.

Holy pilgrimages, special works, righteous living had not accomplished the salvation that he tried to earn. Through the study of the scriptures he was enlivened to the Word made flesh and dwelling in the midst of mankind and ultimately in the hearts of humanity.

His spirituality focused upon God’s Word alone. There God met humankind in humanity’s acts of repentance both in the Old Testament in the obedience to the Levitical laws as well as in the New Testament Gospels and writings of Paul and others. Man could never escape the consequences of sin, nor could he escape the sinfulness of human nature. But he came to understand that God was willing – even desirous – to forgive and have mankind live in that forgiveness that God offered.

Union with God through God's Word, both the written word and the Word made flesh, offered peace and acceptance. No longer did Luther believe God looked upon man as repulsive and as one only deserving of God's wrath but as one who was made to live in a relationship established in creation. Through God's Word and because of God's grace, there is the possibility of union with God.

Therefore the Reformation theology became centered in the themes of "Scripture alone," "Grace alone," "Christ alone," and "Faith alone."²² Through faith in Christ, revealed in God's Word, scripture declared that mankind was forgiven not by acts of contrition nor by one's own works, but by God's gracious giving of God's self by Grace.

This union with God is then nourished by allowing the Word of God to speak to each individual at the place where that person is at a given time. For Luther the Word was vibrant and alive and constantly speaking to the life of the believer.

While Luther spent a great amount of time in prayer and study, much of his spirituality was nourished by his constant dialogs and conversations with students in what has come to be known as his "Table Talks." Much of his theology was developed through his dialogs and arguments with theologians and students. His theology and spirituality found its way into the hymns that he wrote as well as the liturgy he preserved. As the years progressed Luther seemed to also find nourishment in his family and among friends – far from times cloistered in the monastery.

From his writings and preaching it is obvious that Luther's spirituality was strengthened not so much by quiet solitude, but by being challenged in the midst of

²² Sheldrake, 210.

colleagues and by his numerous adversaries. He spoke often of how much his wife, Katie, kept him grounded in the faith. Luther had a tendency toward a boisterous, almost explosive nature; but Katie's love and tenderness kept him in check. He spoke very tenderly of his children and especially of the son who died during childhood.

It becomes evident that not all spirituality is manifested in quiet seclusion. Seclusion might be the most ideal setting for the hearing of God's word as God speaks to us, but sometimes, and it seems to be true for Luther, God speaks in the midst of people – challenging, encouraging, and engaging us in dialog. Many times that seems to be where I meet God most clearly. While I love my quiet times, my profession calls me into the midst of the lives of people. As I serve those around me and witness to the love of Christ in them, I thus live out my faith in obedience to the One who has given his life for me and called me into being.

Chapter 4

The Search for Spirituality

Catholic theologian and professor, Michael Downey affirms that spirituality is the human search for “ultimate value”; it is a seeking to be the best that one can possibly be.¹

This aspect of spirituality is not limited however to religious spirituality but may be incorporated in quests for our sense of nature, saving the environment, American Indian culture, Alcoholics Anonymous, and even Wicca and the practice of witchcraft.

However when we speak of Christian Spirituality we must understand that it is rooted in the need for people to belong together and find expression in word, action, tradition and community. It finds its sense through the person of Jesus Christ. “In the Christian scheme of things, the spiritual quest is for the glory of God.”² The gift of the spiritual life is from God. God draws humanity into relationship with God. This relationship is for all humanity. “From a Christian perspective, God’s providential plan is for the fullness of human flourishing, the redemption of the whole world.”³

This relationship then is nurtured by God’s gift of the Holy Spirit which has been mediated through Jesus Christ. This is the theology of Monergism. Spirituality is not just an aspect of Christian life which is centered around prayer, meditation, fasting, and devotion, it is the whole of Christian life.⁴

One of the methods that has come into rebirth during the last generation has been the Contemplative movement of spirituality. The Contemplative movement within the church had its roots in the attempt to be in relationship with God. From the earthly

¹ Michael Downey, Understanding Christian Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 14.

² Ibid., 30.

³ Ibid., 31

⁴ Ibid., 46.

ministry of Jesus Christ there was an understanding that God desired to have a living relationship with all of God's creation. In the proclamation of the theology that God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus ushered in the understanding of God as "Abba", God as Father, who loves, cares for, and redeems God's people.

Beginning with the ministry of the disciples and their request that Jesus teach them to pray, there has been an increasing desire to come closer to God. The disciples perceived in Jesus a relationship to God that mankind had never before experienced. Jesus embodied the Spirit of God that Jesus was desirous to offer to those who came after him.

On the evening of the day Christians proclaim as Easter Sunday, the disciples were gathered in the upper room – fearful and disturbed over the events of the previous few days. Jesus appeared to them and breathed on them declaring "Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained" (John 20:22-23). Again, following the forty days that Jesus remained on earth after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus instructed his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until after they had received the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49). This would occur at the festival Christians know as Pentecost. The giving of the spirit brought life and vibrancy to this new body of believers that would become the church. Those who went away from that event were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

This breath that Jesus breathed on them was the life giving breath of one-ness with himself. It was the same breath that was present in creation when God breathed into the human God had formed in order to give life. It is "*Ruach*" (breath, spirit) in the Hebrew Scriptures, later translated "*Pneuma*" in the Greek wherein life is given. Theologians understood that the disciples needed that "life" restored following the crucifixion of their

teacher and leader. This is also the same word from which “*pneumatikos*” appears in the writing of St. Paul.⁵

The church began as believers gathered together to remember the teachings of Christ and to be encouraged by the writings of the earliest apostles, Peter, Paul, and John. They were empowered by the Holy Spirit. Those who became leaders within the movement, became known as the “abbas” or fathers in what we now refer to as the “Patristic” period.⁶ Those who were the successors of the original disciples wrote and taught as leaders of this fledgling church. Among the earliest of the second generation of Christians are Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 95) and Ignatius of Alexandria (A.D. 35-c107). This group of Apostolic Fathers kept the faith alive and instructed during the second century.⁶

During this time of persecution of the Christians the church was forced to move into hiding, but it continued to worship and seek union with God and their own community. Worshippers received strength from one another while maintaining a sense of secrecy in their efforts of worship.

By the time of the late second and early third centuries the church was experiencing great opposition from both within and outside her constituency. False theology, primarily from the Gnostics and Arians began to plague the believers with confusion. In that period we begin to see the emerging theologies of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen of Alexandria (c. A.D. 185-254), who insisted that every word of the Bible had significance beyond what one might experience from cursory reading.

⁵ Sheldrake, 42.

⁶ John A McGuckin, “The Early Church Fathers (1st to 6th centuries)” in The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two thousand years from East to West, Gordon Mursell, ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 34.

Origin insisted that the connection between the Old Testament and the gospel parables told the story of salvation. Humanity had fallen away from God's plan for it by becoming completely caught up in materialism.⁷ For Origin, the words of the Bible contained more than would be perceived without spiritual insight. "Origin was so influential in his 'spiritual reading' of the scriptures that this pattern of interpreting the sacred books became standard in the church even though it was moderated (and often rejected) by successive generations of Christians."⁸ His theology proclaimed that Jesus was the understood "Logos"(Word) of God present from the dawn of creation. Logos was God's wisdom incarnated in the person of Christ. Through his teachings Origin became known as the "Father of Christian Mysticism."⁹ He insisted that the human spirit could rise into God's presence only when it was unencumbered by the distractions of the body and the world. His theology gave rise to the ascetical movement and the beginnings of what we would come to know as monasticism.

As early as the fourth century Christians were leaving the towns and communities to take refuge in the desert where they could commune with God and devote themselves entirely to the quest of experiencing God's presence in the practice of asceticism. Perhaps the best known of these early ascetics was Antony of Alexandria who sold all of his possessions and entered into solitude in the desert to give himself wholly to the discipline of seeking God. Those who wanted to experience the deeper life of prayer began to go to Antony for instruction and example.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 56

⁸ Ibid., 56

⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

The Monastic movement progressed to an ascetical lifestyle including depriving the body of everything except the essentials, to celibacy, to living in small communities for safety and in order to maintain the demands of asceticism.

In the pattern of Origin of Alexandria, the Monastic movement began to migrate to the West into Italy in the person of Benedict. Benedict, like Origin, turned away from all that he saw as corrupt and entered a monastery outside of Rome. He imposed a strict discipline upon himself and determined that those who came to follow his example should do likewise. He established his own monastery Rule for the monastic life. Benedict saw the perfect life style as one lived in a community as the family of God.¹¹

By the same insistence he did not have a great deal of patience for individual ascetics. Benedict held that there was much more value in a community practicing his disciplines along with a degree of asceticism while also practicing a liturgical life style of worship, study, spirituality and manual labors. One of the rules of the order was that each monk vow to remain at his own monastery for life. The monk would not move, nor would he be moved from his monastery.

Benedict set a standard for monasticism that has remained until modern times. The monks of a Benedictine monastery see themselves as a part of – yet separate from – the community in which their monastery is located and visitors are warmly welcomed.

The monastic life style was not limited to Christian theology. It became a practice that incorporated those of Eastern methodologies as well. In the process of incorporating

¹¹ Ibid., 56

as a “Prime mover” who engineered the Big Bang and evolution and then just backed off to see how things would come out.¹³

However, none of these images are capable of helping one know God as creator of all that exists and the God who was revealed by Christ as God in human likeness. As Christians we believe that God revealed God’s self more fully in the person of Jesus of Nazareth than by any other revelation.

If we understand prayer as relationship we begin to open ourselves to the realization that God desires to be in relationship with all that God has created. Suchocki continues, “This brings us to the basic supposition of a relational theology of prayer. *God works with the world as it is in order to bring it to where it can be.* Prayer changes the way the world is and therefore changes what the world can be. Prayer opens the world to its own transformation.”¹⁴

Prayer becomes transformative when it is no longer we who are praying – offering our petitions and personal desires – but allowing God to reveal God’s self in and through the one who prays. Thich Nhat Hahn in his introduction to Thomas Merton’s book, Contemplative Prayer, says, “Prayer if it is real is an acknowledgement of our finitude, our need, our openness to be changed, our readiness to be surprised, yes astonished by the ‘beams of love.’”¹⁵

Humankind searches for this relationship that can fill that void of helplessness in life. That void can only be filled by the presence of God. Merton sees this quest for the

¹³ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “View of God can predict values, politics”, in USA Today 9/12/2006 [online posting]; accessed 4/7/08; available from http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2006-09-11-religion-survey_x.htm.

¹⁴ Suchoki, 18-19

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, Contemplative Prayer, Intro. by Thich Nhat Hanh (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1996), 9.

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Humankind searches for this relationship that can fill that void of helplessness in life. That void can only be filled by the presence of God. Merton sees this quest for the deepening of the relationship as coming forth in the centering of prayer. "If it is true that the

¹⁴ Suchocki, 18-19

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, Contemplative Prayer, Intro. by Thich Nhat Hanh (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1996), 9.

deepest prayer at its nub is a perpetual surrender to God, then all meditation and specific acts of prayer might be seen as preparations and purifications to ready us for this never ending yielding.”¹⁵

Prayer finds its most perfect manifestation in the practice of contemplation. However, contemplative prayer is virtually impossible – at least in any extended practice – outside of the monastic community. Merton says, “We must understand the monastic life above all as a life of prayer.”¹⁶ It is only under the condition of monasticism that one is free from the cares and concerns of daily living so that one is available to devote oneself to that needed contemplation.

While it is the goal of this pastor to bring into contemporary life some of the teachings of the practice of spirituality that might be put into practical use, there is the reality that one may experience only fleeting glimpses of the reality that the monastic has spent a lifetime trying to achieve. But if the devoted Christian practitioner can receive even those tiny glimpses, he or she will have a different understanding of his or her relationship with God.

Merton declares that the process of discovery begins with an understanding of who the “I” might be that begins the process of contemplation. We connect the “I” with a proper name and therefore establish an identity that is personal and intended to be in relationship. “Perhaps there is a beginning of truth in this: It is better to describe yourself with a name that is yours alone than with a noun that applies to a whole species.”¹⁷ He describes this

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2003), 4.

Inner Self as not just a part of the being, but the entire reality of self. “It is our spiritual life when it is most alive.”¹⁸

The Eastern practice of Zen Buddhism describes the concept of getting to know the inner self as a discovery of self “before you were born.” It carries with it the practice of removing all outside encumbrances to reduce self to nothingness.¹⁹ Through this reduction of self one is moved toward the state of Satori.

Satori, which is the very heart and essence of Zen, is a revolutionary spiritual experience in which, after prolonged purification and trial, and of course after determined spiritual discipline, the monk experiences a kind of inner explosion that blasts his false exterior self to pieces and leaves nothing but “his original face”, his “original self before you were born”[or more technically, his “Buddha nature”].²⁰

In the process of this discovery one begins to lay aside the divisions and the pride and the egocentricity of our human nature and realizes in a unique and special way the unity with Christ. The Apostle Paul touched on this when he declared in Galatians 2:20, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism within the Christian Church we acknowledge that through the Sacrament, the old has passed away and the new has come into being. This unity with Christ is part of what is striven for in the Inner Self.

The reality is that Buddhism is not to be considered a religion in the sense that we see religion as a means of coming into a relationship with the divine. Zen sees this achievement of the Inner self as the reduction to nothingness completed. Whereas Christianity, at least as understood by Augustine, teaches that once we have achieved that understanding of the inner self, it becomes a mirror through which the presence of Christ is reflected. Therefore we become “Christ bearers” within the world. We confess this within

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Shunryu Suzuki. Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind (Boston: Shambhala, 2006), xiv.

²⁰ Merton, Inner Experience, 8.

the Sacrament of Baptism in which – once the old as been drowned in the baptismal waters and the new has come, we declare, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to the Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

Christian mystical tradition says that one cannot find this inner self - this inner “I” and the place where we must meet God until we are able to rid ourselves of the pre-occupation of the outer self.²¹ For the Christian this involves a faith experience. St. John of the Cross called this faith experience a “dark night”. It is only through faith that we can let go of the absolute and begin to trust that which we cannot see – but trust is there. He called it a “blacking out of the visible in order to see the invisible”.²² But faith brings us into the light that cannot be experienced with the absolute. It becomes a time of awakening of the inner self in order to acknowledge Christ living in us. Faith, then, is that which brings one into the light of Christ.

While faith truly sees beyond the reality of the senses and places confidence in that which is unseen, Zen tends to see what it sees and does not place any prejudicial judgments upon any reality. “Zen Buddhism, which seeks above all to clear away the clouds of self-deception which we cast over external reality when we set ourselves to thinking about it. Zen seeks the direct, immediate view in which the experience of a subject-object duality is destroyed. That is why Zen resolutely refuses to answer clearly, abstractly, or dogmatically any religious or philosophical question whatever.”²³

The Christian then finds this inner “I” in the midst of relationship with others who are searching together. In fact it might be almost impossible to find that inner self apart

²¹Ibid., 15

²²Ibid., 15

²³ Ibid., 20

from others. One discovers that this inner self is inseparable from the Christ who dwells in the person. Merton says that they form the “Mystical person” which is Christ.²⁴

By contrast, Zen finds the inner “I” only in isolation. One is not connected to others who are seeking the same “I” for themselves except through living in community with others. It is only then by deleting the “I” – giving up of self and all that it means that one can achieve the “nothingness” that one seeks in Zen. Zen, therefore, according to D. T. Suzuki, most strongly and persistently insists on an inner spiritual experience... personal experience is strongly set against authority and objective revelation....²⁵

He says that while the Christian might use prayer, contemplation or mortification as a means of attaining a sense of mysticism and the discovery of God, Zen uses a very practical systematic method of spiritual training. “The East is synthetic in its method of reasoning; it does not care so much for the elaboration of particulars as for a comprehensive grasp of the whole and this intuitively.”²⁶

Zen teaches that there is no self in whom we can become absorbed, therefore, the reduction of the “I” is not a sense of mortification – the “I” never existed. Zen is, according to Suzuki, something that is very elusive. Once you think you understand it, it is no longer there.²⁷ “The basic idea of Zen is to come in touch with the inner working of our being, and to do this in the most direct way possible, without resorting to anything external or superadded.”²⁸ Suzuki says that when Zen is fully understood – at least as it can be understood - there is complete peace of mind.

²⁴Ibid., 22.

²⁵ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, An Introduction to Zen Buddhism (New York: Grove Press., 2004), 4.

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

Jesus, in his teaching to his disciples, taught that they should also seek the absence of self. Over and over he told them “the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” (Matt. 20:16) One must become like a little child in order to enter the Kingdom of God. (Matt. 19:14) There is a necessity of putting others before self in order to live as Christ lived. We must see things innocently as through the eyes of a child – without demanding that the world “owes” us anything.

Merton affirms this theme when he says “our meditation should begin with the realization of our nothingness and helplessness in the presence of God.”²⁹ “The gift of prayer is inseparable from another grace: That of humility, which makes us realize that the very depths of our being and life are meaningful and real only in so far as they are oriented toward God as their source and their end.”³⁰

For the Christian our movement toward humility is predicated on our understanding that we bring nothing before God except that which God has already given as a pure act of grace. We see ourselves as the object of God’s love- not because of anything we have done nor anything we have to offer, but because we are the creation of God. All we can do is seek to know God and more fully experience God’s presence through the acts of meditation, prayer and contemplation. Our nothingness, then, becomes for us complete fullness. We come to rely completely upon God’s grace.

“The nothingness within us – which is at the same time the place where our freedom springs into being – is secretly filled with the presence and light of God as long as

²⁹ Merton, Contemplative Prayer, 70.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

our eyes are not on ourselves. Then our freedom is united with the freedom of God himself.”³¹

Merton describes the contemplative life as one of unity. The contemplative does not exist completely in a world apart, but in a world in which one is able to see all things in perspective and in relation to others. While one may begin the process in isolation – at least to a degree – it is not complete until it is seen in the context of the world in which that person lives. The contemplative sees himself or herself as a part of God’s creation and in relationship to all parts of creation.

There are a number of ways the concept of the Inner Experience of prayer and contemplation and the concept of Zen can co-exist and be helpful in leading us to that peace which we all seek.

First of all and perhaps most obviously, we acknowledge that both Contemplation and Zen are forms of meditative practice. Both seek to externalize the world and all that would distract us from the goal of reduction of self. In Christianity that goal is to know God and to experience more fully God’s love for all of God’s creation. And by such knowledge be able to live a life more in agreement with the life of Christ and experience a peace which the world cannot give.

Zen seeks the same end of peace; but does so by reduction of self to the central “I” and then proceeds to the understanding that even that one thing – the central “I” - does not exist. Zen does not accept definitive labels and absolutes. “Indeed Zen cannot be anything

³¹ Merton, Inner Experience, 112

else but original and creative because it refuses to deal with concepts but deals with living facts of life.”³²

Secondly, both teach us ways of experiencing a form of mysticism - if we understand mysticism as experiences which are different from those of sensual experience and thus are able to move one beyond the world of space and time. However, the word “Mysticism” itself becomes very confusing because there are so many different understandings or perhaps misunderstandings of it.³³

Within contemplative prayer there is the sense of emptying oneself. The contemplative is willing to accept God’s love for creation despite all the evidence that might speak otherwise. The contemplative knows that only by letting go of everything that would separate one from God does one become able to taste the presence of God and the enlightenment of one’s inner life.³⁴

Contemplation is essentially listening in silence anticipating the voice of God speaking to the listener. One understands that one hears God speak only when one has ceased to listen. By intentionally listening, one has a tendency to interject God’s voice into the hearing. Elijah spoke of the “gentle whisper” that came to him (1 Kings 19:21).

While we understand that Zen is not listening for the voice of God, the practitioner is indeed listening in silence, ruling out all those distractions that become non-realities. Suzuki says that “Zen aims at preserving your vitality, your native freedoms and above all the completeness of our being. In other words, Zen wants to live from within. Not to be bound by rules but to be creating ones own rules- this is the kind of life which Zen is trying

³² D.T. Suzuki, 16.

³³ Kelsey, The Other Side of Silence, 127.

³⁴ Merton, Inner Experience, 89.

to have us live.”³⁴ Zen then becomes complete freedom of expression. Hanh calls this process Mindfulness.³⁵ It is the practice of being fully mindful of what one is doing at a particular time and eliminating all other thoughts and concerns from one’s mind. Therefore, there is total consciousness of only what one is doing.

Prayer, contemplation, meditation and Zen seek above all else truth and peace.

From the Christian point of view there is the seeking of Christ. Jesus told Mary and Martha following the death of their brother Lazarus, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me”(John 14:6). As Christians confess, Jesus was the embodiment of God in human form; he proclaimed a truth that Monastics, Christian pilgrims and followers have searched for centuries to understand. Christ led his followers to move beyond the cares and concerns of themselves and the world in order to come to understand God’s purpose for them beyond the physical. They were taught to deny their own needs in order to serve those around them. When Jesus sent them out as Apostles the first time he instructed them to not take a staff, no change of clothing, one pair of sandals, and no purse for holding money. They were not going on a fund-raising journey, but on a journey of love and mercy as representatives of Christ. Their being completely dependent upon those they served would indeed be a lesson in humility for them as well as for those whom they served.

The concept of Zen is both understandable and beyond understanding. It attaches no value to words or concepts because to do so gives them definition. Zen places no values even on God, Buddha or the soul because there is no need to use these in the practice of Zen. I find it most

³⁴ D. T. Suzuki, 34.

³⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 7.

helpful for me to think of the quest of Zen as one would remove layers from an onion. (Now I realize this is very simplistic, but for me, helpful). As each layer of the onion is removed one becomes closer to the center – to the heart of the onion. As each is removed, the reality of the onion is reduced. Until one reaches the central little stem at the very heart of the onion – and then one realizes that the center does not exist at all. It has no reality.

In many ways the practice of Zen and the practice of conscientious Christian meditation or contemplation are very similar. Zen speaks of a “secret virtue” in which one is encouraged to not waste natural resources and to make full use of every thing that comes into one’s life and to treat the world with appreciation and reverence. This is not in order to please God, but to be stewards of the earth. Contemplation makes us aware of our place in the created order of the universe. We are part of something that is far greater than ourselves and thus needs to be protected and preserved. True contemplation requires a sense of stewardship.

Suzuki sums up his understanding by saying that in Christianity we are very conscious of the God in whom we move. Zen wants to remove this whole concept of God consciousness. Life is grasped as it flows and there is no effort to stop it and examine it. It happens in process.³⁶

John B. Cobb Jr. advocates a need for dialog between Christianity and Buddhism and that the dialog needs to go beyond the level of conversation to the level of attempting to understand another tradition without the necessity of conversion. He says that “dialog that does not go beyond itself stagnates....When an adherent of another Way speaks to us of what is decisive for that Way, the intention is to tell us of something utterly indispensable to full human life.”³⁷ Cobb’s emphasis is that true dialog does not seek to convert but to understand. Therefore there is

³⁶ Ibid., 102.

³⁷ John Cobb. Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), viii.

needed a sense of openness and acceptance. By this acceptance there is the possibility of hearing the truth that others have to teach. Therefore, we grow through that truth and our own faith tradition has the possibility of intensifying.

Too many times the Christian faith as well as other “Ways” have been hurt by the failure to be open and by their insistence that there is no value in others. This has historically been the case not only between Christians and other religious traditions, but also among the various Christian sects themselves.

Cobb argues also that the acceptance should not serve to impede the conversion of those who are nominally Buddhist or nominally Christian into the fold of true believers. “When Buddhists succeed in converting such ‘Christians’ to Buddhism, we should rejoice in the name of Christ. If Christians can draw into the Christian community in Japan nominal Buddhist of this sort, we should rejoice in the name of Christ.”³⁸ Truth is not an exclusive right of any religion. The Holy Spirit is promised by Jesus to lead us into the truth. It is relational in that it is lived out in the relationship between God and man, between humans relating to one another and in seeking to dialogue with one another. In meeting others and acknowledging their gifts, we become stronger Christians. Cobb quotes the World Council of Churches statement that God intended salvation for all mankind. He later quotes Hans Kung that God is at work in Christ attaining salvation for all humans through the various religions. “1. Every human being is under God’s grace and can be saved: whether he be of this or that nation or race, of this or that caste or class, free or slave, man or woman or even inside or outside the church of Christ. Every human being can be saved, and we may hope that everyone is. 2. Every world religion is under God’s

³⁸ Ibid., xii.

grace and can be a way of salvation.....”³⁹ Hans Kung, a leading theologian of the Catholic Church, has been on the perimeter of the Church for many years, but his is a voice the church needs to hear.

This thought was also emphasized by Paul Tillich, “theologians interpret Christianity once again in the context of the whole global phenomenon of religion. Strictly speaking it is not the history of religions but the phenomenology of religion which especially illumines Christian faith.”⁴⁰ While we live in a world that is constantly changing, the religions of the world have failed to acknowledge this change; therefore we continue to count one another as less than that which we hold dear.

Within Buddhism there is an acknowledgement that the entire world is suffering and the cause of that suffering is that we cling to things. It is only by ridding ourselves of that desire to cling that suffering can be eliminated. Cobb speaks of Stoicism as the desire of all people for happiness but that happiness can be found only in the things that continue to elude us. Stoics assert that happiness can only be found by hanging on to those things that we control.⁴¹ He then compares this Stoicism to Buddhism in that Buddhists must be willing to let go of what others think of them or do to them. Only in the emptiness can true happiness be found. In both Christianity and Buddhism there is the idea that there is nothing wrong with possessions as long as we are free from the desires for them. This freedom includes the desire for Nirvana.⁴² Nirvana, the attainment of nothingness for the

³⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁴¹ Ibid., 77.

⁴² Ibid., 77.

Buddhist practitioner, can only become a reality when the desire or seeking of it ceases.

“To attain Nirvana is to pass away.”⁴³

Luther discovered this while studying in his cell in the Wartburg Castle. In his effort to become worthy of God’s love, he found himself constantly at “odds” with God. It was only in his acceptance that we are justified by Grace through faith apart from the works of the law that he was able to understand God’s total acceptance of him. He found it was necessary to give up the ‘quest’ in order to stand forgiven before God. The quest was that which stood between him and his goal. There is a similar attitude toward the search for Nirvana. Nirvana can only happen when the quest or desire for it has been abandoned.

Cobb offers the concept of Amida, the Buddha. The Amida is the enlightened one who has achieved the fullness of Nirvana. But Cobb compares the Amida to the Christ. Amida was one who was fully human who achieved the level of Nirvana. This one then went on to help others toward their progression toward that state.

Christ, the title given to Jesus because of his redemptive work, was one whom Christians claim was pre-existent. Christ entered the human level in order to teach others the love of God and to attain for them salvation that they could not attain on their own. Cobb says that both Amida and Christ are divine. Christ who was divine by his very nature and Amida as one Buddha among others.⁴⁴ We understand that Christ’s divinity was bestowed upon him before his becoming human. The divinity of Cobb’s Amida is that which is self fulfilled by achieving the sense of Nirvana. The Amida can only assist others in their achievement, while the Christ attains salvation for those he came to save.

⁴³Shunryu Suzuki, 112.

⁴⁴Cobb, 124.

The Apostle John proclaimed that Jesus was God's "logos"(Word) made flesh (John 1:14). His role was to bring salvation to all who believed in him. No one else could take that role. Christ came for a specific purpose – to live among humans and proclaim the Kingdom of God among us. The Amida offers no kingdom. Instead, the Amida offers a path through which others might become as the Amida is. The Amida is one among many, while the Christ is One and Only. Christ is truth completely while Amida is a particular truth.

Chapter 5

Designing a Program

The design of a program for House of Prayer congregation needed to entail more than information sharing about the concept of spirituality. While that was certainly one of the important aspects of the program, it was necessary to involve the people in a process of spiritual development. The goal was to create with them some methods which could become practices that might continue long after the initial presentations were made. There were several resources available that could aid in that process.

Bradley Holt's book, Thirsty for God¹ offered some wonderful background on the growth of Christian Spirituality within the Christian faith. While he gave a brief summary of the historical context of spirituality he also offered some very effective spiritual exercises that the reader could put into practice. I found these particularly helpful because he suggested resources that might be readily available for the lay reader. Many of the practices he offered were also found in other resources.

Tilden Edwards in Living in the Presence² also offered some very valuable exercises that I found extremely helpful as I put them into practice. He was particularly helpful in his understanding of prayer as the beginning of Spiritual practice. Edwards stated, "Authentic prayer is opening to God's gracious presence with all that we are, with what scripture summarizes as our whole heart, soul and mind (Mt.22:37) therefore prayer is more a way of being than an isolated act of doing."³

¹Bradley P. Holt, Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

²Tilden Edwards, Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Presence of God. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

³Ibid., 11.

This became very important when teaching about the various forms of prayer and the necessity to open ourselves to praying always. Several forms of invitation to prayer emanated from the concept of being in a state of prayer rather than conscientiously entering into prayer.

This author also gave some valuable insight into the development of groups for prayer and spiritual development. His appendix of evaluation tools were very important to me as I developed an evaluation process for the participating members from my congregation.

Praying Body and Soul by Anthony de Mello⁴ is a very valuable resource for looking at developing a prayer life that also includes methods of meditation – including some Eastern methodologies. He is very emphatic that the practices offered can lead one into a deeper spiritual understanding. His book is laid out in a process that would be very effective in a retreat type setting – each chapter is completely based on scripture as he moves from one area to another.

Perhaps one of the most helpful resources was that of Corrine Ware's Connecting to God.⁵ Her emphasis was upon the value of the lay person to revitalize a congregation. "So long as laypeople expect pastors and priests to see God in their stead and make no effort of their own, they will be disappointed and stunted. Many clergy yearn for the power and vitality generated by lay members who refresh the congregation with a

⁴ Anthony de Mello, Praying Body and Soul: Methods and Practices of Anthony de Mello, adapted and enlarged by Gabriel Galanche S.J. (New York: Crossroad Publishing 1997).

⁵ Corrine Ware, Connecting to God: Nurturing Spirituality through Small Groups (Bethesda, Md: Alban Institute, 1997).

contagious spirituality born of study and prayer and a lively faith. Such church leaders are eager to empower laypeople to engage in their own spiritual development.”⁶

She specifically addressed my concern within this work of the need for the laity to revitalize the church. The pastor does not have adequate energy after all of the administration, counseling, visitation, sermon preparation and special needs to enmesh the congregation with a deep sense of their own spirituality. Therefore it is important that the laity take responsibility in learning and sharing the gifts of spirituality for the church.

I relied very heavily on her within the study materials for her use of prayer methods. She offered a wide variety of prayer methods with an excellent understanding of their historical and theological settings.

The most advantageous program for me was the incorporation of Richard Foster’s *Renovare*’ program.⁷ With some adaptation and addition of some specific resources for study and prayer this program was very suitable for our application. Foster divided the outline of the history of the Christian Faith into six specific movements or traditions. These divisions made it very helpful to look at the various movements and specific biblical studies addressing each movement. This program incorporated a sense of the historical movement of the church as a way of seeing the process of development.

I also incorporated some additional materials such as music, dialog, and prayer methodologies to more fully meet our needs. Foster offered exercises in each tradition to help the student gain an insight into understanding how each tradition manifested itself both historically and within the contemporary church.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ James Bryan Smith, with Lynda Graybeal, *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small-Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

By the addition of traditional hymnody, contemplative and Taize' music, the incorporation of specific prayer methods that went along with each tradition, and the use of silence, I was able to help the student feel more comfortable in the understanding of each movement of study.

As I looked at the traditions of Foster's *Renovare*' program it became obvious that the traditions sometimes blended together – the distinctions between traditions were ill-defined at times. History cannot be separated clearly into distinct divisions. However there were some movements that manifested themselves more clearly in specific historical genres than in others. I felt it was more advantageous for me to look at a chronological depiction of the historical epics than jumping around from period to period as the program proposed. I felt this would offer our students a more progressive perspective. I particularly appreciated the historical context that Foster proposed because it would give some feeling of a progression through the growth of the church.

He began with the searching for spiritual enlightenment of the Desert Fathers and Mothers within the Contemplative Movement. As we have already suggested this period manifested itself in deep introspection and discernment of the presence of God. However, their search was manifested apart from the busyness of daily life. These leaders went away by themselves or into communities of other seekers so that they could practice more effectively. The practice of monasticism was a clearly defined method of spirituality.

With the continuation of man's inhumanity to man, wars, pestilence and all the devastations that came with them, disease, starvation, homelessness and more, we begin to see the hearts of social concern moving away from the monasteries and convents and into the streets –carrying a message of the love of Christ away from self-fulfillment into the

world of pain and agony. This was the introduction of the Social Justice Movement of the late twelfth century. The Church saw herself as the proponent of the poor and those living and dying in poverty and disease. This genre brought about the introduction of care for the poor and homeless as well as those who needed physical care. The church then became a prime mover in the development of hospitals, orphanages and places of care following Christ's injunction to care for the widows and orphans.

It became apparent to me that the next major movement in this progression was that which took place about three-hundred years later at the end of the Dark Ages and the beginning of what we know as the Renaissance. It was during this time that Martin Luther came along with the emphasis upon the Word of God as of primary importance. The message of hope, redemption and renewal was one the world needed to understand. The Evangelical Movement declared this message according to Foster. It was out of this perspective that the Reformation and the beginnings of the Protestant Church arose. One of the propositions of this period and of the Reformation was to open the Word of God to the lay reader and remove it from the complete dominance of the church. No longer would people be completely reliant upon how the church interpreted scripture.

Approximately two-hundred years later came the emphasis upon the power of the Holy Spirit within the faith of the people. George Fox founded a group known as the "Quakers" in which the emphasis was upon the Spirit of God manifested in each person. This movement that Foster calls the Charismatic Movement relied upon the Spirit's urging to move persons to witness to their faith. There were many conversions during this period and those conversions led to the growth of the church far beyond those of this particular movement.

Foster then leads his study into the eighteenth century with the arrival of John Wesley and the rise of the Methodist Church. The emphasis was upon the role that each individual takes in fulfilling his or her rejection of sin and sinfulness. His emphasis was upon the need for individuals to see themselves as the temple of the Holy Spirit and the place in which God dwells. This was the introduction of the Holiness Movement.

The final movement that Foster introduces is the Incarnational Movement when the emphasis was upon the fact that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. By walking among humanity, God gave us the example to follow and did for us what we could not do for ourselves in taking away our sin through God's death on the cross in Jesus. A very important aspect of this movement was the understanding that since each person became the temple of the Holy Spirit, there was a direct connection between what took place in one's secular life with the faith that person held. Each person had not only the opportunity but also the obligation to witness to his or her faith on a daily basis.

All of these movements lead in a progression of church history. While they do not represent clearly designated periods, it seemed that when one began to fade another would come into prominence. While we might look at these movements as representing particular periods in history, we can still see the effects of each of these movements in the lives of contemporary Christianity.

Chapter 6

The Program in Use

Having the program designed based in large measure from Foster's 'Renovare' with the additions and movements that we have already discussed, it was time to bring the sessions into reality. There were to be two distinctly different classes offered over a period of six weeks. During this time the sessions would require a commitment of the participants for at least one and one-half hour sessions and full attendance if at all possible. We would also be asking the participants to commit to the confidentiality of the classes.

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT (SPIRITUALITY) SESSION 1

A. Welcome

B. Begin with pausing to breathe and pray.

C. Brief explanation of what we hope to accomplish

1. Not strictly a time of fellowship

- a. A time of study

- b. Prayer introducing different kinds of prayer methodologies

- c. Sharing of our experiences

- d. An introduction of meditation practices

2. We will be flexible in order to allow questions and growth

3. Need for commitment for the 6-7 weeks.

4. Talk about the best time to meet..

D. The discovery of God in our lives:

As we know Jesus Christ functions in many ways within the Christian life:

Savior, Teacher, Lord, Friend. Sometimes we experience him in one way

more intensely than another. Which role have you experienced most frequently and which do you understand the most clearly? Which of these statements would best fit you?

Jesus Christ is my Savior: He forgives my sins and gives me freedom.

*Jesus Christ is my Teacher: He teaches me wisdom and guides me into
an understanding of truth.*

Jesus Christ is my Lord: He lives at the heart of my life.

Jesus Christ is my Friend: He understands me and gives me comfort.¹

E. There is a balance in Christian Life.

We quite often understand that God works in a particular way in our life and we experience that way at certain times in our life. But there are other ways in which God works that we might not understand so easily. This is not meant to be discouraging, but is meant to lead us to increase our strengths and then stretch and grow in other ways that are less familiar to us.

F. Comfort Zones:

All of us have areas (zones) of Spiritual awareness in which we are more comfortable than others. When we are in these areas of our life we are comfortable; when we are asked to move out of these areas we become less and less comfortable.

¹ Smith, 25.

Spiritual growth asks us to move out of those comfort zones and experience God in refreshingly new ways.²

In which of the following “Zones” do you feel the most comfortable?

1. I love my job and enjoy being at work.
2. I feel most comfortable when I am around my close friends.
3. I am athletic and enjoy playing sports.
4. I enjoy being at home-working in my garden, working in my yard, or reading.
5. I am a “socialite and enjoy being with large groups of people.

During the next several weeks we are going to be following the basic outline of Richard Foster’s RENOVARÉ (Renewal)³ program for Spiritual development – with some obvious additions and subtractions. This program is based on the life of Jesus and the fullness of his life in God. The Gospel accounts tell us:

*That Jesus prayed, and we hear his teaching about the life of intimacy with God.

*That Jesus battled Satan in the wilderness, and we listen to his teaching on the importance of a pure heart and strength to resist sin.

*That Jesus ministered with great power, and we hear his teaching on comfort, wisdom, and the strength that comes from the Holy Spirit.

*That Jesus helped the poor and needy, and we hear his teaching on the importance of caring for our neighbor.

*That Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of heaven and we

Hear him reading from the Holy Scriptures. Jesus saw himself as the fulfillment of the scriptures.

² Ibid., 26.

³ Ibid. 27.

*That Jesus was able to integrate the sacred and the secular while observing the ceremonies of his faith.⁴

When we look at our Lord's life there are some distinct things that emerge:

- a. Devotion and obedience to God the Father
- b. Purity in thought, word and action
- c. Empowerment by the presence of the Holy Spirit
- d. Compassion toward people of all kinds
- e. Proclamation of the presence of the Kingdom of God
- f. A sense of unity between faith and daily life.⁵

**With which of these areas of Jesus' life are you the most familiar?

It is upon these areas that we will be focusing during our time together. The goal then is to gain an understanding of these areas as they are related to Jesus' life and hopefully incorporate them into our own lives.

SIX MOVEMENTS WITHIN THE CHURCH

Some have described the history of the Church as defined by movements. These movements describe how God's Spirit has acted within individuals and groups. Usually these movements fall within the areas that we have already mentioned. Renouart describes these movements as "Traditions" – which bring into focus the renewal of the church. When one area began to wane, another took its place. However, we can see a great deal of "overlapping" among the areas. They were by no means completely distinct time periods.

In the fourth century men and women left the life of the city to gather into

⁴ Ibid. 26.

⁵ Ibid. 26-27.

cloisters and monasteries where the importance of solitude, meditation, and prayer were emphasized. The Desert Fathers and Mothers became the foundation for what we have come to know as the *Contemplative Movement*. Emphasis was upon being away from the busyness of regular life and concentrating upon God's presence. Ascetics practices denying themselves of everything except the very essentials of life. This cloistering was essentially the beginnings of Monasticism.

In the late twelfth century we see Francis of Assisi and some of his followers abandoning their former lives and traveling about the countryside in Italy reaching out to the sick, the poor and the lame. Many men and women followed the lead of Francis and thus was formed the Franciscan and Poor Clare orders. They had a tremendous impact upon disease and poverty. This movement became known as the *Social Justice Movement*.

Then in the sixteenth century Martin Luther ushered in the time of the Reformation. He and others proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ after discovering anew its message in the Bible. This message of redemption, hope and victory was expressed by clergy and laity by a renewal in preaching the word, in mission efforts, and in personal witnessing. The church has come to know this movement as the *Evangelical movement*.

During the seventeenth century the Church witnessed a renewed power of the Holy Spirit in a group called the "Quakers". Led by the ministry of George Fox, the active presence of the Holy Spirit led to a lot of conversions. The Holy Spirit was at the center of worship and led to evangelism, new mission outreach and social concerns. This came to be known as the *Charismatic movement*.

Along about the eighteenth century John Wesley and his friends formed a group which came to be known as the “Holy Club” and began focusing on the need for Christians to overcome their sinful habits. They developed a “Method” to follow and the church began to take seriously the concept of sin. The Methodists had a dramatic effect upon what has become known as the “*Holiness movement*”.

The final movement, the *Incarnational movement*, was begun around the eighteenth century also when a man by the name of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf gave permission to the remnants of what was then the Moravian Church to build a village on his estate. When they experienced a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit they began serving God – praying, evangelizing, and helping others in the midst of their other daily tasks.⁶

Of course there have been other movements within the church but these are marked as having significant effects upon the life and history of the church.

EXTREMES IN AREAS:

While each of the movements that we have described (in the six traditions) is rooted in the life of Christ, there were those adherents who carried their particular area to an extreme. As we have seen throughout all of humanity, people take a good thing and abuse it by carrying it too far or taking a single aspect and over-emphasizing it. The truth is we need to look at all of these traditions in our lives, even if one or the other is uncomfortable.

⁶ Ibid. 27-28.

The graph that we used is a change from the wheel that Foster recommends. This seems to be more easily definable at the beginning of the program and will lend itself more clearly to a possible re-evaluation at the close of the session.

As we look over the various movements, we can realize that each of us have some characteristics of each of them. Some are more pronounced than others.

Contemplative: Spending time

with God in meditation and prayer 1-----10

Social Justice: Helping

the less fortunate. 1-----10

Evangelical: Sharing the gospel

and reading the scriptures 1-----10

Charismatic: Experiencing the

presence of the Holy Spirit and

acknowledging the gifts 1-----10

Holiness: Having pure thoughts

And resisting temptation 1-----10

Incarnational: Blending the sacred

And the secular with God's gifts 1-----10⁷

Looking over these six traditions, and what they represent, we realize that the dimensions of our spiritual life can be graphed so that we can see how well we are doing in each area. In order for us to well – rounded, we need to be somewhat balanced in our gifts; however that does not mean we are equally strong in each area. No one has all the gifts, we all have strong and weak areas. What do you feel is your strongest and weakest area on the graph? It is those weaker areas that we might want to focus upon during the next several weeks. During the next six weeks we will look more carefully at the “traditions” and hopefully discover ways of enacting them in our lives.

REJOICE IN WHAT YOU HAVE AND IN WHAT OTHERS HAVE:

Some of us are stronger in some areas or traditions than others. This gives us some important insight about our relationship with others. First of all we give thanks to God that God has touched each of our lives in giving each of us some unique talents and abilities. Each one of us has been gifted so that we can use those gifts for the Church and for one another. So let us rejoice in the diversity of our giftedness.⁸

Second, each of us has a lot of room to grow and expand our gifts. This is not intended to discourage us because rarely is someone strong in each of these areas. The excitement begins to grow as we become strong in those areas that we felt were the most difficult for us. We also rejoice as we see others begin to grow in their spirituality.

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Ibid., 30.

Being in a group is a special blessing because we support one another; we help build up one another's strength. We give thanks to God for the strength of one another. That is one of the purposes of the group.

WRITE A LETTER:

Sometime during the coming week, take a few minutes to write a letter to God. Try to remember when you first became aware of God's presence in your life and the ways that God has revealed God's presence to you. Close the letter by reflecting upon all that you know of God now and what you would like to have revealed in the future. Next week, hopefully we will be able to share some of those insights (if you desire – NO ONE is required to share).

PRAYER METHOD: CONVERSATIONAL PRAYER⁹

It is my hope that you are already comfortable with prayer. I would like for you to consider becoming more comfortable with praying "at will." Begin by allowing your life to be one of prayer conversation with God.

During the next weeks we will also be examining and experimenting with various forms of prayer. Some of them you have probably done all your life; others might be new for you. But by experimenting with prayer we may discover some methodologies that are very comfortable for you as well as some that may be difficult.

The first method is one with which you are probably very familiar. It is known as *Conversational Prayer*. It is a prayer using words (not all of the methods do).

⁹ Ware, 35.

Conversational prayer is like talking to a friend. We simply talk saying what comes to mind. While we need to verbalize our thoughts to a friend, God knows the thoughts of our hearts, so we do not necessarily have to speak out loud – (this keeps others from thinking we are crazy too).

These prayers are also very short – perhaps ten seconds to a minute in length. One might pray for guidance, give thanks, or pray for a situation that you might encounter. I find myself praying in this way as I drive. I might see a situation where I ask for God's presence or upon my day as I move through it.

This type of prayer assumes that God is listening and that prayer makes a difference in the lives of people – even though we may not see the results. Another very important aspect of this type of prayer is that the pray-er feels that he or she is never alone. It is here that we realize that God is always present in all of our circumstances.

Take time to jot some notes about your experience using conversational prayer or you might want to take note of some of the circumstances about which you prayed. Consider how this form of prayer felt for you. Did you feel as if you had God “on-the-line” and did not hang up?

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT - SESSION 2: THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

Welcome:

Silence and Prayer:

Questions from last session:

Review: “Letter to God” from last session:

“What did I learn about God and about myself from this experience?”

THE PRAYER FILLED LIFE

Read: Mark 14:32-36 Lectio Divina

The practice of reading scripture by the method of Lectio Divina has been a part of the Christian practice since about the fourth century. It is a devotional reading of scripture in which the passage is read ONE time for continuity. It is then read a SECOND time more slowly looking or listening for words or phrases that particularly speak to you. Then after a few moments it is read a THIRD time listening for what God is saying to you as you read it or hear it. Finally, there is a period of sharing (without comment) of what phrase or word spoke to you.¹⁰

Mark 14:32-36

They went to a place called Gethsemane and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want but what you want."

FOLLOW-UP WITH THE LESSON:

In spite of the demands upon Jesus and the constant requests made of him, Jesus took time regularly to pray. He needed time to talk to God. His relationship with the Father was an integral part of his life. In fact his mission was to do the will of the Father.

We see him frequently leaving the crowds behind – even leaving his disciples behind – to retreat to a deserted place to pray (Mk.1:35). The model he set before his disciples caused them to want to follow in his footsteps. They wanted that intimacy with

¹⁰ Edwards, 93-94.

God that Jesus possessed so they asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1).

The disciples were not alien to prayer – at least not all of them. As Jews they would have heard and perhaps offered prayers in the synagogue worship. But those “ritualized” prayers were offered by the rabbis. The prayers that they knew were probably the formal prayers of the synagogue, however, the prayers Jesus prayed were very different.

What set Jesus apart from the disciples and even the other rabbis of his day was the relationship he had with God. He even addressed God as “Abba, Father”. The word “Abba” would have been the equivalent of our “Daddy”. It represented a closeness, a trust and a loving relationship of a child to his parents.¹¹

Jesus trusted God above all things. We see him praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the time of his greatest agony – “For with you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want but what you want.”(Matt. 26:39)

Jesus prayed often. The busier he got the more he prayed. Martin Luther was reported to have responded to a student one time when he was asked how he found time to pray, that he was too busy NOT to pray. Prayer is what got him started in his day. Jesus knew God as Abba whose primary concern was to love, to heal and to teach God’s people. God was filled with compassion and strength.

****In the Garden, Jesus prayed “Remove this cup”... this requirement to die on the cross.**
If Jesus knew that it was for this reason that he had been born, why do you think he prayed this way?

¹¹ Smith, 25.

THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION:

The church must acknowledge that God is the head of the church and is present in each of the historical movements. We acknowledge Jesus as Emmanuel - God with us. He proclaimed, as no-one ever before him, the true nature of God. Within the Contemplative Tradition we acknowledge that God knows our needs even before we ask. Jesus then portrays a God who is filled with love, compassion, and a desire to offer healing to God's people.

In the Gospel of Luke the writer gives us three parables of the lost: "The lost coin"(Lk. 15:8-10), "The lost sheep (Lk. 15:3-7), and "The lost son" (the prodigal son, Lk.15:11-32). Perhaps nowhere else in all of scripture do we get a more loving picture of God than in the waiting father who waits anxiously for his lost son to return home. Then when he does, he welcomes him with open arms, a time and joy and a great celebration of reunion. The judgment and punishment that the son thinks he deserves never comes. When we know God as loving, forgiving, and welcoming, our prayers take on a different tone, don't they? The Gospel proclaims that God longs for us, searches for us and was willing to die for us. This is a God with whom we want to spend time.¹²

****Reflect upon this picture of God as portrayed by the waiting father in the parable. How does that image compare to your image of God?**

THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION HISTORICALLY:

The Contemplative tradition proclaims that God desires to have a relationship with us and that we need to create time and space for God within our lives. Contemplation was

¹² Ibid., 33.

already practiced as early as Origin of Alexandria (A.D.185-254) who taught that one could ascend to the height of spiritual freedom only by denouncing the world and all that came with it. Those who retreated to the desert wilderness to follow their calling of intimacy with God became known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers. They practiced an ascetical life style of self-denial and humility in order to draw closer to God. They gave us the example of denying the world in order to provide a place in their lives for God.¹³

In the midst of our busy lifestyles – at work, taking care of children and families and the various schedules that we try to meet every day, keeping up with the chores around the home as well as our social schedules, we tend to try to squeeze every second out of every minute. As we watch television or listen to the radio, we are constantly reminded of the things we “need to have” and the activities that take up all our free moments. We even feel guilty when we find ourselves doing something creative that might be for ourselves. Despite all of this we need to find a place for God. We need to find times of solitude and silence, times of reflection, prayer and meditation. Just as Jesus needed to find time to be with God in prayer, so do we.¹⁴

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE:

So how do we practice the example that Jesus gave us? Below is a list of spiritual practices that may help in this endeavor. I invite you to choose *one* of the following exercises and practice it several times during the week. We are trying to develop a prayer-filled life and the best way to do that is to pray. Remember that these are only a sampling of possibilities for you.

¹³ John A. McGuckin, “The Early Church Fathers (1st to 6th centuries)” in Mursell, 57.

¹⁴ Smith, 34.

Please remember some *precautions* as you begin. Don't worry if you are not completely successful as you begin. We are not trying to reach a goal, but to experience God. If you fail, that's all right; count it as a learning experience. Second, remember it is not the method that is important; what is important is God. Don't worry so much on "what" you are doing, as much as "why" you are doing it. Reflect back to what you said about your strength or weakness on the "chart" from last week. This is one of the areas in which we are trying to grow.¹⁵

EXERCISES FOLLOWING THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

1. *Block out at least five minutes each day for uninterrupted prayer.* Find time in your schedule that is as free as possible from interruptions. It is good to begin by reading a scripture verse and meditating on it for a few minutes. You may want to spend your time talking to God about your concerns and needs and burdens of your heart. The idea is to stop whatever you are doing and give your total attention to God for Five (5) minutes.
2. *Find five or ten minutes during your day to spend in total silence.* This is not as easy as it may sound. But find a time in which you can be completely silent. While letting yourself enjoy this complete silence, pray without words. You know how sometimes you can sit in the company of a friend and just be silent – no words are needed; try this with God. Feel God's love around you and enjoy God's presence.
3. *Find a good devotional resource and read some selections.*

¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

There are a number of devotional resources available – we offer Christ in Our Home¹⁶ and The Word in Season,¹⁷ but there are numerous resources available.

The important thing is not just to read the words, but read it with God – knowing that God is in the room with you sharing in your reading.

4. *Pray the same prayer for ten minutes each day as a kind of mantra.* I know that sounds strange, but it is very refreshing. Historically we find that within the Eastern Church there was a practice called “Hesychasm” which is the practice of repeating the same prayer over and over.¹⁸ The idea is to focus upon God and not upon the words that we are saying. The prayers can be very simple, one sentence prayers such as “Come into my heart, Lord Jesus” or the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner” or “Create in me a clean heart, O God.”¹⁹
5. *Write your own original prayer and pray it daily.* Last week we asked you to consider writing a letter to God. This process is very similar. Begin with “Dear God” and then tell God your hopes and dreams, your concerns or worries, and your needs. You may use this letter as a time to confess your sins and ask God for forgiveness. The important thing is to open the lines of communication with God. Keep it confidential. Don’t write it as if it were going to be shared at any time.

¹⁶Rebecca Grothe, Carolyn Banks, and Laurie J. Hansen, eds. Christ in Our Home: (Light for Today) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing House, 2007).

¹⁷ Rochelle Y. Melander, Carolyn Banks, eds. The Word in Season (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing House, 2007).

¹⁸ Smith, 36.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36.

It is between you and God. Once you have written it, read it and pray it every day during the week.²⁰

PRAYER METHODOLOGY:

Following very closely in the Contemplative tradition the prayer method that we will be trying this week is called “Centering Prayer” This is a meditative type of prayer that can be a wonderful experience of peace, love and the sense of God’s presence. But it is not an easy prayer. It takes some effort to do.

While there are differing methods of meditative prayer, all of them have a sense of inner stillness and a waiting upon God. Centering prayer requires quiet spirit and a relaxed body. As you begin take note of where your breathing is coming from. When we are stressed and tired, we tend to breathe from our chest. I invite you to concentrate on breathing from your diaphragm – let your abdomen fill with air as you take your deep breaths.²¹ (Please note, we are not so concerned with breathing technique as we are with quieting of the mind and body so that we can be in God’s presence.)

There are a few pointers that might be good to consider here:

1. Select a sacred word to draw you into this time of God’s presence. Don’t be afraid of the term “sacred word”. There is nothing magical about it...it is kind of a centering word. Possibilities might include, “peace,” “Abba,” “Spirit.” I have used the Hebrew word “Ruach” which means wind or spirit or breath.²²
2. Sit comfortably with your eyes closed, settle into the sacred word as a way of giving yourself permission to enter into God’s presence. Try to block out all

²⁰ Ibid., 36

²¹ Ware, 43.

²² Ibid., 44.

external thoughts and concerns that distract you from God... empty yourself into God's presence.

3. When other thoughts and distractions begin to intrude upon your time, don't get frustrated, just simply repeat your "Sacred word" and return your thoughts to God.
4. At the end of the prayer (Ten minutes, thirty minutes, an hour...) remain in silence with your eyes closed for a couple of minutes to linger in the moment.²³

The whole point of Centering prayer is to make yourself "available" to listen to God. God is able to communicate to us through feelings, impressions, peacefulness, silence, and even questions. Now be aware, this method of praying takes time... few are able to get "Into" it for more than a few moments at a time – until they are more practiced with it. So don't get discouraged, but give yourself time to make it happen. I don't think you will be disappointed.

The Eastern religious tradition of Buddhism calls this practice "mindfulness"... allowing oneself to focus ONLY on what one is doing at the present moment.²⁴

You might like to jot down a few notes about what the experience was like for you.

Closing Questions

Closing Prayer

SESSION 3: THE COMPASSIONATE LIFE: THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION

Welcome

Questions left over from the Charismatic Tradition

Quieting and Prayer using the method of Mindfulness

²³ Ibid., 44.

²⁴ Nhat Hanh, Miracle of Mindfulness 7.

What were your insights on the Methods of the Charismatic Tradition?

How did you like the concept of praying the scriptures?

THE COMPASSIONATE LIFE AND JESUS

The Gospel passage for this week is Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you as a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” NRSV

** Have you ever felt like a stranger? What does that feel like? Did anyone reach out to you?

DIGGING DEEPER

The people of Jesus’ time understood the concept of shepherds and sheep and goats. So Jesus used this simile to compare separating people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. It says that we are NOT to neglect those who are in need. There will be a

judgment coming from the Lord himself in which he will separate those who cared for others and those who did not.²⁵

The people who were receiving the blessing were just as surprised as those who were receiving the curses... because none of them saw their caring as that of caring for Jesus. Those who helped did it out of love and compassion and concern for their fellow human beings. Those who did not help others did it out of self-involvement, or distrust, or lack of concern for others. None of them saw their actions as concerning Jesus.

Notice that both groups call Jesus “Lord”. They all knew him but not all followed him. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” Just “knowing” who Jesus is may not be enough; we have to do what he calls us to do.²⁶

This is not intended to mean that we “earn” our place in heaven by doing good works; we do not believe in “works righteousness”. We do not do good works “in order” to be saved; we do them “because” we are already saved. We can do nothing of our own will – good works, obeying the law, serving others – to earn our salvation. That has already been gained for us in the death and resurrection of Christ. But we are not free to neglect those who are in need. Because we are saved, it is incumbent that we reach out to others. From those who call him “Lord”, great things are expected.

** When we think of Social Justice, what other groups might be considered who need our help?

²⁵Smith, 52.

²⁶Ibid.,52.

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION AND GOD

Jesus said that we can not love God and hate our neighbor. He told the Pharisees that the greatest commandment is that “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and will all your soul, and with all your mind.” But he would not leave it there, he insisted that there was a second that had to go along with it; “You shall love your neighbor as yourself...”(Matt. 22:37-39). God first loved us and we should love God in return. Jesus told his disciples, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another (John 13:34). God gave us God’s only son to suffer death on the cross for us, our only response is to love God in return.

All of the world, all of the Universe belongs to God. God created it and called it good. As we look at the world we do so through the eyes of love and compassion and understanding. God cares what happens to us. God also understands that we are sinners and instead of judging us, God calls us into reconciliation with Himself through healing and forgiveness.²⁷

At a lecture Tuesday evening, October 10, 2007 in San Diego, Thich Nhat Hanh, a world recognized leader in Buddhist teaching said that the only way the world would ever know peace was not through guns and weapons of war, but by understanding, compassion, and love.

Jesus’ life was one of compassion and caring for those who were “the least” among us. He cared for the sick, cast out demons, cured the lame, made the blind to see, cleansed the lepers, opened the ears of the deaf, and had meals with those that the world despised – prostitutes and tax collectors. Jesus hated injustice and fought it wherever he

²⁷ Ibid., 53.

found it. He drove the money changers out of the temple, he confronted the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees, and he lifted up those on whom others looked down.

****Have you ever witnessed someone being treated unjustly? Have YOU ever been treated unjustly? What was your response?**

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he responded with two: Love God and love your neighbor. He told the story of the Good Samaritan to show that neighbors are not just the people close by us or even members of our family; but anyone who needs us,

The Church has always been involved with Social Justice. One of the primary functions of the church is to care for those less fortunate than ourselves. It is through the church that hospitals, care centers, nursing homes, soup kitchens, orphanages, schools, and social service agencies got their start. Even today, it is the churches that provide food for the homeless and operate the homeless shelters. We can look around at some of the institutions that emanated from the church – the Salvation Army who has worked with the poor and outcast for many years. Perhaps the prime example of social justice outreach comes through the efforts of Mother Teresa and her Sisters of Mercy. Our own Lutheran World Relief has sent aid to the poorest countries for many years. Even our own church and our quilt ministry is a vital part of our Church's outreach and caring ministry.²⁸

In addition to ministering to immediate needs, the church, through the Social Justice ministry, has gone into countries to teach people how to farm and raise crops and

²⁸ Ibid., 54

animals as well as provide water resources for long-term survival and self-support. Christ calls us to speak out for the under-privileged and those who are denied opportunities that most of the rest of us take for granted. Christ calls us to fight against discrimination on any level and make sure that people have their basic needs and rights met. This is a way in which we show love for our neighbors – especially those who do not look like us or talk like us.

****** Do you have a special cause that “tugs” at your heart? What do you do about it?

PRACTICES WITHIN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION

It is impossible to help others without feeling that you are being helped in the process. Our Gospel for this Sunday spoke about Jesus responding to the desire for more faith on the part of the disciples. Jesus responded by saying that they needed to practice the faith that they had. “If you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, you can say to the mulberry tree, be uprooted and be planted in the sea, and it will obey you.” However, we need to always be aware of “why” we do what we do. It must not be for our own gratification, but out of love and compassion.

Richard Foster, in his book, Celebration of Discipline, points out some differences between self-righteous service and true service. He marks the following distinctions:

1. We must listen to God when we perform loving tasks. Real service flows from our relationship with God, not out of our need to be of service.
2. Self-righteous service looks for that which would be a “big deal” and would get us recognition. True service simply looks for what needs to be done whether it is simple or great.

3. Self-righteous service looks for ways to be rewarded. Genuine service does not care if anyone notices that we have done the service. It does not look for reward or gratification, but is done for God.
4. We are not to be concerned with what the results look like. Sometimes our service does not have any outward results. We serve because it is needed.
5. Self-righteous service makes a distinction on whom will be served. True service does not look at color, creed, race, or status in order to serve. The Epistle of James calls us to task for favoring the rich over the poor.
6. Self-righteous service considers how we feel at the time. Whereas true service is concerned with the need. Our moods do not affect our serving.
7. Self-righteous service is something we do to feel good and get done with it. True service goes on for a long time – or as long as necessary. The purpose is to serve the needs of those who need our help.
8. We need to learn to listen to what people tell us and respond according to those needs. Too often we give to people what we think they need without considering what is truly needed.
9. Self-righteous service helps build up rather than tear down. Our good works are not meant to be something that must be repaid by the recipient. ²⁹

EXERCISES IN THISTRADITION

1. Write a loving letter to someone.

²⁹, Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, 20th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1998).

We all have someone who needs to be uplifted and encouraged. It doesn't take much to write a letter to that person telling them how much they mean to us.

Perhaps someone is going through a particular battle right now, the death of a loved one, a sick spouse or child, a marriage that is in trouble. A short letter can do a lot of good for someone.

2. Volunteer to serve at a soup kitchen or food bank.

Our local Interfaith Community Service serves breakfast and a sack lunch five days each week and relies upon volunteers to make that happen. Our church participates regularly. Perhaps you can serve there in some capacity. There are other agencies that are regularly in need of volunteers.³⁰

3. Find an area of injustice and try to help out.

There are agencies all around that fight injustice. Look around and see where you might be able to help. But first examine yourself to determine why you are getting involved – is it for your own satisfaction or are you really trying to use your expertise to affect change. Don't be critical but move positively to help others see the injustice that is occurring. It might even be someone at your work or at a school or even at church where someone is doing something that is illegal, immoral, or un-ethical that you can help point out and remedy.³¹

4. Stand up for others.

In our age there are still instances of prejudice – racism, sexism, injustice that you might find a way of addressing. Remember to be intuitive, positive, and peaceful in dealing with others.

³⁰Smith, 57.

³¹Ibid., 57.

5. Protect the reputation of others.

The Eighth Commandment says “Do not bear false witness.” Keep away from gossip backbiting, and when you are confronted with it, challenge it and help others see the damage that it causes. Our reputation is one of the most valuable possessions we have.³²

PRAYER METHODOLOGY

The prayer methodology for this week is very simple. I would like for you to look at the concept of “formal prayers”. Formal prayers are the kind we use every week in worship services. Many are written in our Evangelical Lutheran Worship³³ books or in the old Lutheran Book of Worship.³⁴ We use them for the Prayers of the Day each week. They have been written by theologians and follow the ancient pattern of the “Collect” (collection of prayers of the people). Take note of the wording and especially how causes are lifted up for particular Sundays. The fact that they begin on page 18 and continue through page 87 should give you an idea of the amount of time and effort that has gone into these prayers.

Formal prayers can also be found in daily devotional books.

I encourage you to read a couple of these prayers each day and take note of how often they are very apropos to our daily life.

How do these prayers effect you? Do you feel comfortable using them? What do they say about our understanding of the mercy and grace of God?

³² Ibid., 57.

³³ Lutheran Book of Worship, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House 1978).

³⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Worship. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing House, 2006) 18-

(If you would like to borrow a hymnal from the church, please feel free to do so – just remember to bring it back)

Closing Questions

Closing Prayer

SESSION 4: THE WORD CENTERED LIFE: THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION

Welcome:

Questions from last week and the Holiness Tradition

Quietness and Prayer

Did you try one of the exercises for last week's tradition? If so, which one?

How did it work for you?

Were you able to try the Rhythmic Prayer method? How did you feel about it?

THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT

The Evangelical Movement found its roots around the 16th century following the time of the Reformation. When the reading of God's word was "re-discovered" there was a renewal in listening and experiencing what God had to speak to all readers.

Gospel Passage: Luke 4:16-20a; 42-44

"When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

And recovery of sight to the blind,

To let the oppressed go free,

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave back to the attendant, and sat down...

He said, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogue of Judea." NRSV

**** Do you remember how you became aware of the good news of God's kingdom? Was it through a sermon or did you read about it in the Bible?**

FURTHER STUDY:

It was the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus had just completed his time in the wilderness following his baptism by John and the time of testing and temptation. He was filled with the Holy Spirit so he returned to his home area around Galilee to teach in their synagogues. He was receiving praise from all those who heard him.

Now the truth of the matter was that Galilee was considered backward by many – especially from the Judeans. Galilee was physically separated from Judea by the area of Samaria. A lot of the population lived in small towns and its economy centered around agriculture. Today we might think of them as somewhat crude... but they saw themselves as refined and cultured and as good as anyone else. Like some of the areas of our country, Galilee had been so cut off from others that they had developed their own dialect.³⁵

But it is right here in the midst of his own town's folk that Jesus began his ministry. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath as he usually did. But it was to these people that he reads the scriptures and points to himself saying "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

³⁵ Smith, 60.

Can you just imagine the shock that these people experienced as they heard these words from Jesus. They had waited for centuries for the Messiah to come. The Messiah would come to deliver them from the hated Romans and the political oppression they had been living under. Every Sabbath they would go to the synagogue to sing praise to God, pray for the Messiah and listen to the scriptures. They lived in anticipation. They lived each day facing cruel soldiers who did not share their faith, tax collectors who took their hard earned money and gave it to Rome, and they waited for the coming Messiah. There had been numerous self-proclaimed messiahs who had come before and died without making a change.

Now here was a local carpenter, whom they knew as the son of Mary and Joseph; whom they had watched grow up and had even hired to work for them – claiming to be the anointed one – the Messiah – and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

No wonder they asked who he thought he was. The Messiah would not come from such a small town as Bethlehem! They didn't understand this stuff about the Kingdom of God! In the part of the text that we did not read, they become enraged at Jesus and try to throw him off a cliff. But he continues to do what God had called him to do – to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God.

** Have you ever considered how Jesus can speak to you about release of the captives?

EXPERIENCING GOD IN THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION

We understand that God reveals God's self in three central ways: the written word, the living Word, and the spoken word. We are very familiar with the Bible, God's written word. The first five books, the Pentateuch, contains the law or Torah. It includes the 10 Commandments and as we read in Exodus those first appeared on stone tablets, then later

were copied onto rolled scrolls of parchment that were passed from one generation to another. To that were added the “Prophets” and the “writings”. This was the way God chose to communicate with God’s people. They were viewed as God’s actual words and as such were treated with reverence and tender care. There was a tradition that before the Jewish scribe would copy the word for “God” he would wash his hands.³⁶

Today we call these Hebrew scriptures our “Old Testament” and then we go on and add a “New Testament”. Some Christians add the “Apocrypha” which fills in the history of the Israelites during the inter-testamental time-from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The purpose of the New Testament is to proclaim Jesus, the beginnings of the church, the faithfulness of the apostles, the letters or Epistles, and John’s Revelation.

The Living Word, Jesus Christ is the clearest understanding of God that we have. We believe that God revealed God’s self in Jesus. John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word (Logos) and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This Logos reveals a nature of God that the ancient Hebrews had not understood. God was one who healed, who creates, who loves, who blesses. As Christians we proclaim that when we look into the face of Christ we see God.³⁷

As much as we might try it is impossible to fully understand the mystery of God becoming human in the person of Jesus. In the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul declares that Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:15-17).

³⁶ Ibid., 61.

³⁷ Ibid., 61.

The third way of God's revelation, the spoken word, the proclamation of the Gospel, is at the core of the Word –centered life. Words are intended for the purpose of communication. We use words in order to have a relationship with one another. With spoken words we proclaim the gospel to those who have not heard the good news. We use words to tell the story of Jesus Christ.³⁸

******Lets spend a couple of moments talking about how the proclamation of Jesus Christ has had an affect upon your life? What are some of the affects?

THE EVANGELICAL TRADITION:

The Greek word “εὐαγγέλιον” euangelion is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter asserts in Acts “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”(Acts 2:21). But later Paul asserts, “But how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Rom 10:13-15).

So what is this Good News that we proclaim under the Evangelical tradition? It is that God entered our world in the person of Jesus Christ bringing with Him the message that the Father longs to have a relationship with us. God wants us to respond to God's love by loving God in return. Jesus reveals to us the Kingdom of God that is filled with Joy and love and peace.³⁹

When the Pharisees wanted to know when this “Kingdom” would come, Jesus responded that it would not come with signs that could be observed so that we could look and say, “Look, here it is!” He told them that the Kingdom of God is within our midst.

³⁸ Ibid., 62

³⁹ Ibid., 62.

The Kingdom is available to all who believe this euangelion of the gospel. This is what the Evangelical tradition is all about. Thich Nhat Hanh in his lecture said that we have the privilege of walking every day – every step in the kingdom of God.⁴⁰ This is what Martin Luther proclaimed when he said we are “Justified by Grace through faith, apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

HOW CAN WE PUT THIS EVANGELICAL TRADITION INTO PRACTICE?

There are three primary aspects of the Evangelical tradition – the Bible, Jesus Christ, and proclamation. But while we say it simply, it creates some anxiety. For many the Bible is not an easy book to read and understand. Some may not be able to accept Jesus Christ as the Living Word – the Son of God. And we all know that many of us find it difficult to proclaim the gospel; we don’t want to make others feel uncomfortable. These are legitimate concerns, but we can take small steps to allow our faith and confidence to grow.⁴¹

First of all, find a translation of the Bible that is comfortable for you. The King James Version is difficult for many people, because that is not the language that we use in a normal conversation. Second, we need to read the Bible with our hearts and not just to get through the text. What is the message saying to you? For spiritual formation to take place we should read it slowly – even repeating verses so that they can sink in. This is not a reading pattern with which we are normally familiar.

Sometimes we “shy” away from Jesus because some of the more “fundamental” expressions of faith have “laid claim to him”. Perhaps we need to ask Jesus to help us in our faith and understanding. We can read the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

⁴⁰Thich Nhat Hanh, lecture: Jennie Craig Pavilion 10 October 2007, San Diego, CA.

⁴¹Smith, 63.

over and over until we can get a grasp of his birth, his life, his ministry, his teachings, his humanness, and his death and resurrection. It is all “jammed” into a relatively short amount of time, so it takes some digesting to get through it. By getting “into” Jesus, Jesus can get into us.

When it comes to sharing the gospel, we need to remember that it is not our job to convert anyone. We simply tell the story of what God has done. We plant the seeds and God will gather the harvest. If we try to change anyone, we will fail. Most people are like “Lutherans”—they don’t like change and they certainly don’t want someone telling them that we believe they should change. The best witness we can offer is to live the life Christ offers us, and let others “hunger” for what we have. The Holy Spirit does not force people into the Kingdom of God, but rather draws them in – including us.⁴²

Let us also remember that as Lutheran Christians, we come out of this Evangelical Tradition. Martin Luther emphasized the importance of reading and studying God’s Word. Our faith is based on “Scripture Alone,” “Faith Alone,” “Grace Alone.”

EXERCISES IN THIS TRADITION:

1. *Commit a verse of scripture to memory:*

You might pick a scripture that is unfamiliar to you and commit it to memory.

Last week we talked about speaking a verse as we walked. The purpose of this is to put God’s word deep into our spirits and allow it to grow there. You can use any method of memorization that works for you, but let it become a part of you.

⁴² Ibid., 64.

2. *Read aloud one of the shorter books of the Bible:*

In the early days of Christianity, the Gospels and Paul's letters were read aloud by the communities of faith. Some of Paul's letters are fairly short, (and to be honest, they sometimes make more sense when read aloud). As you do this try to imagine how those first Christians may have heard those words.

3. *Meditate on a verse about Jesus Christ.*

Take a simple passage and read it over and over and let it sink in. Think about what it means to you. What is God saying about God's self? What is it saying about Jesus? If a particular word jumps out, think about it and perhaps journal about it.

4. *Imagine yourself as one of Jesus' brothers or his sister.*

Turn to the Gospel of John 7:1-8. Imagine that you have known Jesus since you were born; he is your older brother. You grew up in the same house, worked together in the same carpenter shop. But now he is acting strange, preaching, traveling around the countryside healing people and talking about the Kingdom of God. How do you feel about this brother who has changed from the one you knew? Are you proud? ashamed? Embarrassed? Jealous? ⁴³

5. *Look for opportunities to share your faith.*

Pray first for these times... that God will put you in proximity to someone who will be open to hearing what you have to say and that God will give you the right words when the time comes.

6. *Proclaim the Gospel by the way you act toward others:*

⁴³ Ibid., 65.

Make a special effort to allow your actions to speak for you. Pray for insight to see your life as others see it. Pay particular attention to the way your actions are seen by others. When others see you, who do they see? When you think about this, it can be very “eye-opening.”

PRAYER METHODOLOGY: PRAYER USING IMAGERY

The prayer method we will introduce this week is not always the easiest to do but it can be very comforting and healing when you get into it. We want to pray using mental images or picture. An image is something we use to create a visualization in our mind’s eye. It is what we do to imagine a scene or a person.⁴⁴ Corrine Ware says, “We can direct the mind’s eye toward our inner world to bring about the creative forces of spirituality and healing in our daily life.”⁴⁵

Begin by closing your eyes and picture yourself in a place of peacefulness and safety. It can be a place you have visited; a place from your childhood that was good for you; or it can be a meadow, seaside, mountain or whatever. It is a place in which you are very comfortable. Go so far as to imagine the time of day, the sunshine, the time of year, and even the sounds around you. Now place yourself into that scene and imagine a sense of the Holy there. Whatever your image, it must be a sacred and safe place.

“As you imagine this scene, say whatever you wish, do whatever you wish, or simply *be* without saying or doing anything.”⁴⁶ Maybe you just want to rest there – without being sleepy – but being alert to all that is around you. You might want to

⁴⁴ Ware, 36.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

imagine a bowl or basket into which you place all of your troubles and anxieties, and then offer them to God.⁴⁷

Remember that you can stay in this place as long as you wish. You do not have to achieve anything in this place. This praying is not about achieving. Once you are in your imagined setting, you have already arrived where you need to be.

In the Bible some of those who used imagery were Isaiah when he described the six-winged seraph with the tongs and hot coal... or John in the Book of Revelation. Of course theirs were vivid images... Ours might not be so powerful, but that is all right. Let your imagination take you there and experience the peace of God in that place. Have fun with it.

Questions

Closing Prayer.

SESSION 5- THE CHARISMATIC TRADITION: THE SPIRIT EMPOWERED LIFE

Welcome and Settling in:

Quietness and Prayer:

Questions from last session: The Evangelical Tradition

What practices did you try from last week? How did they work for you?

Did you try praying using Imagery? How did that feel?

Today we are going to introduce the Charismatic Tradition.

Our Gospel passage is from John 14:15-17, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the

⁴⁷Ibid., 38.

world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you...

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you..."

"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning..."

I tell you the truth: It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the "Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

**** An advocate is someone who pleads your case before an arbitrator. Have you ever had an advocate speak on your behalf? What did he or she do for you?**

DIGGING DEEPER:

These passages from John are known as the "Paraclete" sayings. The Greek word "paraclete" is the word Jesus used for the Holy Spirit. It was originally a legal term meaning advocate – one who pleads for a client in a court of law. Paraclete literally means "to call alongside" which is what Jesus says the Holy Spirit will do for us.⁴⁸

Jesus here is trying to get the disciples to understand that even though he is going to leave them, they will not be left to 'fend' for themselves. The task of the Holy Spirit was to help them in Jesus' absence. That is what the Holy Spirit does for us as well.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 45

The first thing we notice is that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. He would help them know what is right and pure and holy. Those who rely on their own efforts do not understand the work of the Spirit. If they cannot see him they do not believe he is there. For those who believe, there is a powerful trust in the presence and power of the Spirit.⁴⁹

He also will teach them everything. Prayer comes through the teaching of the Spirit. He helps us discern what the gifts of the Spirit are and how to use them. The Apostle Paul says that the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). The Spirit leads us to understand these gifts and corrects us when we do wrong.

The Holy Spirit also “testifies” about Jesus Christ. When we hear the Gospel story of Jesus’ birth, life, miracles, death and resurrection, it is the Holy Spirit who helps us receive that news and believe it.⁵⁰ Martin Luther, in his explanation of the third article of the Apostles Creed said, “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts and sanctified and kept me in true faith.”⁵¹

Jesus told his disciples also that the Holy Spirit would “prove the world wrong” about its relationship with God – about sin, righteousness and judgment. Isn’t it comforting that we are not the ones to judge – that is the responsibility of the Spirit?

Next, the Holy Spirit speaks only what he hears from the Father. He is to give honor to the Son, and helps us understand Jesus’ relationship to the Father. “He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine” (John 16:15).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁵¹ Joseph Stump, An Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism: A Handbook for Catechetical Instruction, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1935) 88.

The disciples were distressed that Jesus talked of leaving them. He was their teacher with whom they had traveled, with whom they had eaten, and with whom they had lived for the past three years. He was the one for whom they had left their livelihoods and families. Now he was leaving them and they were not sure what was going to happen to them. However, now every believer could have union with Christ's spiritual body.

The coming of the Holy Spirit ushered in the church – the body of Christ. It is through him that the church can bear witness to the truth, offer forgiveness of sin and teach the world that which Christ taught his disciples.

**** Do you feel the Holy Spirit working in your own life? How do you feel him?**

The Charismatic Tradition in Relationship to God:

At Pentecost, when the believers received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Church was born. We recognize One God in Three Persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But when it comes to praying we quite often forget the Spirit. We freely pray to God the Father and to Jesus, but rarely do we hear anyone praying to the Holy Spirit.⁵²

We believe that The Holy Spirit is God active in the lives of people. In reality what God the Father and God the Son began, the Holy Spirit continues. Do you remember the famous creation painting of Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: God is reaching out His hand to Adam and Adam is reaching out to God, but their fingers do not touch. It is the Holy Spirit that completes that union. "The distance between God and God's people is bridged by the Holy Spirit so that we actually become one with God."⁵³

⁵² Smith, 46.

⁵³ Ibid., 46.

As Christian believers, we believe that we are temples in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. The Holy Spirit empowers us to proclaim the Gospel and to do those good things that we could not do without the Spirit's help. He has given us gifts that we are intended to use in helping others. God the Holy Spirit dwells in each one of us calling us to do the work of the Spirit in the world.

** If you were to consider those gifts that Paul says come from the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control, which would you say has most clearly manifested itself in your life? Which one do you need to work on the most?

WHAT IS THE CHARISMATIC TRADITION?

As we look at the gifts of the Holy Spirit listed above, we see that none of these would be possible without the Spirit. In fact it is the Holy Spirit that undergirds all of the traditions that we have been considering. It is the Spirit that urges us to pray (Contemplative Tradition); to seek a virtuous life (Holiness Tradition); to practice compassion and mercy (Social Justice Tradition); to proclaim the gospel (Evangelical Tradition); to find a way to "mesh" our faith and work (Incarnational Tradition). When we try to live our lives without the presence of the Holy Spirit, we lose the joy of life and become frustrated.⁵⁴

The Charismatic Tradition comes from the Greek word *χαρίσμη* (charism) meaning gift. Unfortunately, charismatic movements that show the working of the Holy Spirit in people's lives, have tended to make others feel uneasy. In fact some churches put so much emphasis upon specific gifts that they tend to look with suspicion upon those

⁵⁴ Ibid., 47.

who don't practice those gifts. This has caused a lot of dissention among churches and even among church members.

We talked before about God's desire to have a relationship with us. God wants to be active in our lives and to give us God's love, joy and God's peace. Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come and remind them of all that he had had taught them.⁵⁵

THE CHARISMATIC TRADITION IN PRACTICE:

The Holy Spirit freely come to us; we cannot grab him nor force him to come. All we can do is be willing to "receive" him. In a real sense, the concept of Spirituality is intimately involved in the Charismatic Tradition. There are some things we can do to make ourselves more receptive to God's Holy Spirit.

First we ask for Him to come. When we pray for the Spirit, we are asked to be patient and open to God's indwelling presence in our lives. Second, we have to "make room" for him by getting rid of some of the things that crowd him out.

We have already talked about some of the things that the Holy Spirit offers us when He enters our lives. Richard Foster offers these suggestions of the things we can expect from the Holy Spirit: He gives us sense of unity with Christ; Leads us into all truth; Helps us worship God; Guides our decision making; Illuminates our Bible study; Motivates us to action; Gives us the right words as we share our faith with others; and softens the minds and hearts of those with whom we share our faith.⁵⁶

Wouldn't it be great if we could see dramatic changes in ourselves or in the lives of those we touch? Certainly there are things that change dramatically, but most of our

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48.

experiences come slowly and sometimes imperceptibly. The Holy Spirit changes the way we view things and the way we think, and that sometimes takes a long time.

EXERCISES TO PRACTICE IN THIS CHARISMATIC TRADITION

1. *Yield to the power of the Holy Spirit in your life.*

This may sound like a difficult option, but try spending about an hour in prayer specifically asking for the Holy Spirit to begin acting in your life in a new and exciting way. Since you are asking God to enter into you, don't be demanding and don't set up unrealistic expectations. Surrender yourself to God's power and be patient. Literally you are "making room" for God.

2. *Re-read the gifts of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.*

Notice that these gifts are set in contrast to the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21): Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger and so on. Try setting aside fifteen minutes each day to meditate on the fruit of the Spirit. Ask God to help you determine which needs to be more evident in your life, then pray that God will work in you what God sees you need.⁵⁷

3. *Look for your spiritual gifts.*

When you read 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 you will find the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. The church needs all of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 49.

these gifts – in varying degrees. Which do you think you possess and which needs to be stirred up in your life?

4. *Ask the Holy Spirit to read the scriptures with you.*

Pray for the Spirit's guidance as you read the scriptures and ask Him to open your mind to the message for you there. Select a passage from the Bible to reflect on and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to the verse or phrase that is meant for you to hear. When you have discovered this point, spend 10 –15 minutes reflecting on it.⁵⁸

5. *Listen to the Holy Spirit when you are making decisions this week.*

Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would “guide” them. When you have to make a decision this week (big decision or small decision) seek the Spirit's guidance by praying about it before you make it. (Don't expect a bolt of lightening or a booming voice telling you what to do) – it may come as a special intuition, or a friend's advice, or perhaps a door of opportunity opening or closing. Remember, “The Spirit of God will never lead you into a decision that is contrary to the principles and commandments found in the Bible.”⁵⁹

PRAYER METHODOLOGY – PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES

The prayer method this week is very simple but very effective. I invite you to open the Bible to any passage you would like – the Psalms and the Gospels work particularly well for this exercise – and read the passage as a prayer. Ask God to be with

⁵⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 50.

you as you read this passage. You may want to interject the word “I” in order to make it a personal prayer. I suggest you try several different passages to see how it works for you.

Closing Questions

Closing Prayer

SESSION 6: THE HOLINESS TRADITION

Welcome:

Questions from last week and the Contemplative Tradition

Quietness and Prayer

What Contemplative method did you try? How did it feel to you?

What did you discover from it about yourself and about your relationship to God?

How did you do with the Centering Prayer method? Did you find it easy or difficult?

How did you feel about this prayer method?

In Session Three we are going to be introducing the “Holiness Tradition.”

Now I encourage you not to get too wrapped up in the concept of “Holiness”. We understand that we can do nothing by ourselves to make ourselves holy... but God has done everything for us in Christ.

Let’s begin by looking at the passage about Jesus Temptation in the wilderness.

Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him and suddenly angels came and waited on him." (NRSV)

**** Have you ever been offered a deal by someone that seemed just too good to pass up?**

How did you deal with that offer?

LOOKING FURTHER:

Jesus had just been baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. As he came up out of the water a dove lit on him and a voice from heaven proclaimed, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased"(Matt. 3:17b). Then we are told that the Spirit led him into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and nights. What is the significance of 40 in the biblical context? We see it several times throughout the scriptures. In the account of Noah, we are told that it rained forty days and nights; Moses was on the mountain with God for forty days when he received the Ten commandments; The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years... Jesus fasted for forty days and nights before being tempted by the devil. Forty does not designate a specific time "chronologically" – it was not one month and 10 days... instead, it represented a "Kairos"... God's time – the right amount of time.

After the 40 days of fasting – he was allowed by God to be tested. Now we have to understand, God tests Jesus – Satan is the one who tempts him. Satan tempted Jesus. Notice it was the Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness for prayer and preparation. God does not tempt anyone; God wanted Jesus to be strong. It was Satan who wanted Jesus to

fail. So the Spirit leads him to fast and pray, so that he can resist all that Satan can throw at him.⁶⁰

If you noticed there were three temptations that Jesus faced and they represent the same kinds of temptations that we face. First, satisfy our own human need; second, test God's love and protection; and third, the greed for power. In the lesson Satan tempts Jesus to "prove" he is who he claims to be. "If you are the Son of God..." and to take a short-cut to earthly power. Satan even used scripture to try to get to Jesus. When Jesus resisted all of the temptations, Satan left him and the angels came and ministered to him.

In Luke's version of this passage, it says, "Satan left him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13).

Jesus remained true to his calling. He had the power to turn stones into bread; he could have probably "floated" down from the roof of the building; and the authority that Satan was offering was only temporary. Jesus saw through all of those and resisted.

THE HOLINESS TRADITION:

God calls us into obedience. God calls us to turn against sin. We have heard that all our lives. So, what is sin? Sin is anything that causes us to act against God. In the book of Genesis we read that Adam and Eve turned against the command of God that said that they were not to eat the forbidden fruit. When Moses was on the mountain receiving the 10 commandments from God, the children of Israel helped Aaron fashion a golden calf – reminding them of the Egyptian gods they had left behind. Jonah tried to run away from God by not obeying the command to go to Ninevah. None of them got away with it. Sin always has consequences.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Smith, 38.

⁶¹ Ibid., 39.

The commandments were not given to take our enjoyment out of life and fill us with guilt; however, we tend to look at them that way. They were given so that we might have a joy-filled life in the proper relationship with our creator. The commandments give us freedom – not “carte blanche” – but freedom to be a part of community with God and with one another.

God calls us into holiness because it is the most liberating way to live. Believe it or not, sin disrupts our lives and leads to destruction. We do not have to be “saints” to reject sin; just committed to obey God commandments.

WHAT IS THE HOLINESS TRADITION AS WE UNDERSTAND IT TODAY?

God desires us to live a life that is pleasing to God and ourselves. As we said last week, God desires to have a relationship with us. A holy life is not one that is bereft of joy and enjoyment – it is a life that is whole and healthy. Neither is it just obeying rules. The Pharisees obeyed rules perhaps better than anyone else. They had created 611 laws from the 10 originally given by God to Moses – they thought obeying laws was enough, but the Pharisees missed the Spirit of the law.

Early in Israelite history, holiness was set apart as a means of distinguishing the “clean” from the “unclean.”⁶² Later in Jewish history the Pharisees set up many standards that defined holiness. Among these was the prohibition of working on the Sabbath; the proper preparation of foods and the specific designation of which foods could and could not be eaten. They also set up strict standards which required a good Jew to stay away from anything regarding the Gentiles.⁶³

⁶² Ibid., 40.

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

When Jesus came onto the scene he boldly challenged their rituals and their concept of purity. He told the Pharisees that it was not what went into a person's mouth that made him unclean, but what came out of the mouth. He pointed instead toward the purity of the heart as obedience toward God.

Jesus also told his hearers that he had not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. Keeping the commandments was very important, but the mercy of God must also play a vital role in all actions. We keep the laws of God because of our love of God; not because of our fear. We obey God's laws as we would obey the rule of our parents.

****** Why do you think Jesus came down so hard on the Pharisees and their insistence on the many rituals and laws?

History tells us that Martin Luther practiced many extreme rituals in order to be holy enough to earn God's love. But he always felt like he came up short. What are some of the ways we can practice the Holiness tradition to come closer to God?

Please remember, the exercises that we will practice in this tradition are not intended to make us instantly "holy". They help us obey God's commandments. We are made holy only by the death and resurrection of Christ, but we can find ways of coming closer to God. We will be working kind of from the "inside out". These exercises may be helpful if you will give one or two a try.

EXERCISES FOR THE HOLINESS TRADITION:

1. *Ask God's Holy Spirit to enter into your heart; then listen to God.*

Set aside a good block of time – perhaps an hour – for a deep sincere prayer.

Ask God to purify your heart through the power of God's Spirit. To pray this way means you need to be willing to give up control of your life. This means

that we need to be willing to allow God to find the hidden dark spots of our heart and bring them into the light. Pray for the Holy Spirit to take your sins away.⁶⁴

2. *Respond to the temptations in our own life by using God's Word as a tool.*

In the scripture passage we read earlier, Jesus was able to fight off the temptations of the devil by the use of God's word. It might be well for us to look at those three scriptures that Jesus used (Deut. 8:3; 6:16; 6:13) and put them into memory. They correspond to three of the temptations you and I face daily – (1) fulfill selfish desires; (2) test God's power over nature; (3) seek wealth, power and fame. As Jesus used the word of God, so can we.⁶⁵

3. *Try a partial fast for a period of 24 hours.* Now don't let that scare you. We are told that Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness to gain spiritual strength. When we fast, we say "no" to our uncontrolled appetites and thereby gain power over them. Unfortunately, the practice of fasting also reveals hidden traits that we may not like to see... such as anger, selfishness, the desire for instant gratification, laziness and others. These might become traits that we may want to change later. A possible route might be to fast from lunch to lunch – skipping dinner and breakfast. If you do this remember to drink plenty of fluids and perhaps some juice.⁶⁶

4. *Try taming the tongue.* Jesus told the Pharisees that it is not what goes into the mouth that makes us unclean – but what comes out of it. The Epistle of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 41.

James talks about the power of words and the necessity of our “bridling” our tongue (James 3:3-6).

* *Try going a day without saying negative things.* Begin by praying for the Holy Spirit to guard your mouth - preventing you from saying anything negative about anyone or to anyone. It will take a lot of work and conscious thought. Don’t be critical or negative. If you have to give an honest opinion about something, try to be positive. Offer complements as often as you can. (if you are successful perhaps we will ask you to instruct the entire congregation on how to do it.)

**Try to make it through an entire day without saying anything that is dishonest.* This includes deceit, double-talk, falsehood, bending the truth, manipulating words as well as lying. Ask the Holy Spirit to make your heart pure.⁶⁷

These practices are not easy, but they can be very freeing. God’s blessings as you try these.

PRAYER METHODOLOGY: RHYTHMIC PRAYER

Were any of you able to enter a monastery this week to do your praying? Neither was I. We are all very busy people. We have schedules that barely allow us time to think, much less, enter into long extended prayers. But let’s not beat ourselves up over that fact. We need to learn to be creative in our prayer experience. One way is to try to make prayer fit into our regular daily routines. We have already practiced “Conversational Prayer” in which we just talked to God as we went about our daily schedules. This prayer is very similar to that. It is a kind of “Prayer-on-the-run.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁸ Ware, 40.

Some of you who are walkers or runners may really enjoy this concept of “Rhythmic Prayer”. I’ll bet as you have walked or run, you have had the experience of having a line of a tune run through your head – despite the fact that you may use a stereo with a headset as you move. Try to substitute a brief prayer phrase as you walk. The phrase may be a line from one of the Psalms, or a specific scripture that you like, or from one of the hymns. Just walk along with the cadence of the passage. Some possible examples might be: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps. 23). “I lift my eyes to the hills from whence my help comes” (Ps. 121). “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me... I once was lost, but now I’m found.” Or even the Jesus Prayer: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” There are thousands of options... but just allow that phrase to go with you as you walk or run.

There was a practice in ancient monasteries where monks could go to an enclosed space to walk and pray. This gave them physical exercise as well as a time of prayer. Walking is good. But too often we are so focused upon where we need to be – hurrying to meet a friend, or for physical movement. A prayer phrase can be placed in the cadence of walking or running. You may have to practice to get the cadence regulated with your prayer.⁶⁹

This type of prayer works well with this particular Holiness tradition because it gives us time to think about our actions in the midst of our own active walking or running. This is one of the best times to do some self-evaluation.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 41.

Questions and concerns:

Closing with the Lord's Prayer

SESSION 7 THE INCARNATIONAL TRADITION

Welcome and settling in:

Questions from the Social Justice Tradition-

What exercises did you try? How did it (they) work for you?

How did you like the concept of praying the "Formal Prayers"? Did they speak to you?

Silence and Prayer using the Mindfulness exercises

OUR LORD'S PRESENCE IN THE SACRAMENTAL LIFE

Gospel Luke:13:10-17

Now he was teaching in the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day? When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing. NRSV

** As you were growing up were you taught to honor the Sabbath day and not do any work then? How do you feel when you do work on Sunday?

DIGGING DEEPER

At the time of Jesus the Pharisees had a strong influence on the people. They had established many rules regarding what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. They determined what was considered preparing a meal, how far a person could walk on that day and what was considered labor that had to be put off until another day. There has been a lot of controversy between sacred and secular even in our own time. Prayer is no longer officially permitted in public schools, religious artifacts such as the 10 commandments are fought when they are displayed in public places and on and on. It is an ongoing battle.⁷⁰

Several places in the New Testament tell us that Jesus regularly taught in the synagogues throughout his ministry. We are told that the order of the service was somewhat similar to our worship services. There were songs being sung, they listened to the reading of scriptures, and listened to a message by the local rabbi. Jesus was probably the guest that day and was teaching there.

Luke tells us that right in the middle of the lesson a woman appeared who was bent over so much so that she literally looked at the floor. Now the fact that a woman would appear in the synagogue at all was different enough; only men were seated near the rabbi, but women could be present around the periphery or perhaps on another level. We are not sure why this woman appeared then. Perhaps this woman was too crippled to make it to her “assigned” place. Or perhaps she was trying to enter without being noticed. At any rate, Jesus noticed her and had compassion for her.⁷¹

In the session dealing with the Evangelical Tradition, Jesus quoted the Prophet Isaiah about “release of the captives” so he was fulfilling his calling when he called the

⁷⁰ Smith, 68.

⁷¹ Ibid., 68.

captive woman over to him and released her from the bonds with which Satan had held her for eighteen years. Notice that the leader of the synagogue began to complain to the crowds about Jesus – but he did not confront Jesus directly. He complained that if a person wanted to be healed –considered work – there were six other days in which that could happen. It was not supposed to happen on the Sabbath. Jesus knew this mentality so he responded directly to the leader of the synagogue and to the rest by using an example from their own daily life. It was considered cruelty for a person to not feed and water his animal – even on the Sabbath. So Jesus confronted them with the fact that they were living a double standard. They would untie their animals and lead them to water on the Sabbath, but they would not permit him to “untie” this woman from her bonds. He asked them if their animals were of more worth than this “child of Abraham”?

Jesus lived his life honestly. He was able to intertwine the sacred and the secular. He could not be one thing for one person and something else for another. He lived his life displaying the mercy of God to whomever he met.⁷²

THE INCARNATIONAL TRADITION AND GOD

In the Charismatic Tradition, we talked about the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. There is probably no other concept about God that is more confusing than this doctrine. Churches have been divided by the doctrine. People have been frustrated and other religions sometimes see the Christian Church as having three gods. There have been volumes and volumes written about this doctrine. We even have the Athanasian Creed that attempts to explain the Trinity, but it is very difficult to understand.

⁷²Ibid., 68.

As Lutheran Christians we believe in the Triune God – One God in Three Persons. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of God on earth. “Incarnation” literally means “becoming flesh”. God became one of us in order to show us how much God loved us. Then following the crucifixion and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we believe that God came to live among us as the Holy Spirit – dwelling in us so that we might know God’s presence and love.

By God’s becoming one of us in the person of Jesus and walking among us, living the life we live and walking the earth as we do, God blessed all aspects of our existence. Jesus touched the lives of all kinds of people – even those that were considered “less” than others. By working as a carpenter, Jesus gave his understanding and approval to all kinds of vocations.⁷³

It is often tempting to think of Jesus as soft and fragile. The image we receive of Jesus from the Gospels is “anything but” fragile. He worked with his hands as a carpenter, he was able to over throw the tables of money changers and use a whip to drive them out of the temple. He endured forty days and nights in the wilderness, he dealt regularly with “crusty” fishermen and disciples. And at the same time he held people spellbound when he spoke; so much that they followed him from one place to another to hear him. I suspect he had a good sense of humor to hold people near him as well.⁷⁴

****Have you ever considered the things you do every day - taking care of children, cooking, washing dishes, ironing, running errands, going to work, loving your family, as important to God?**

⁷³Ibid., 69.

⁷⁴ Ibid.,70.

THE INCARNATIONAL TRADITION

The theology of God the Father becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ is well understood within the church, but we also must understand the presence of God the Holy Spirit in the incarnation. We confess that God the Holy Spirit dwells in God's people teaching them to understand God the Father and God the Son.

We are more inclined to understand the physical world in which we live. There are things all around us that we can touch, see, smell, hear, and taste. Our physical senses tell us when we are hot or cold and we react accordingly. Our senses are very important to us and protect us from all kinds of harm, as well as lead us into various kinds of pleasures. But the realm of the spirit is more difficult to grasp. It does not impact our lives in the same way that the physical things do. However, the spiritual side of our senses impacts us greatly.⁷⁵

It was only after the Fall that we read about in Genesis that we see the disunity of the body and spirit. We were created to be in perfect unity with our body and spirit. The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Romans said, "For I do not do what I want, but the very thing that I hate"(Rom. 7:15). It is for this very reason that we are given the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, worship and serving. These disciplines make us available to God to re-order our lives.⁷⁶

When this unity is re-established in our lives we begin to make a connection between the sacred and the secular. We begin to understand that what takes place during the week is just as important as what takes place on Sundays. God created both and is intimately involved in both aspects of our lives. In this unity of spirit, we become what

⁷⁵ Ibid.,70.

⁷⁶ Ibid.,70.

Martin Luther called “little Christs” to one another. Our minds, hearts, hands, voice, limbs become dwelling places of the Holy Spirit and we then become instruments through whom the Spirit works.⁷⁷

****Do you really believe that God works through you in order to touch the world and people around you? How do you react to that concept?**

PUTTING THE INCARNATIONAL TRADITION INTO PRACTICE

The first step in practicing the Incarnational Tradition is being willing to change from our hearts. When we begin to see ourselves as embodying the presence of God, our outward actions begin to change also. We need to be willing to open ourselves to God’s acting in our lives. We begin by breaking down the separations that we have mentally erected to keep spirit from physical, our faith from our professions, our souls from our bodies, and even the practice of our religion from the things of the world. When we look at Jesus we see him blending his life and his calling into one.

One of the doctrines of the Lutheran Church is that we believe in the “priesthood of all believers”. Every kind of vocation represents a kind of calling from God. When Jesus worked as a carpenter in Nazareth, he understood that labor as a calling for him at that time. Every task that we do represents a way in which we can serve God.

No longer do we view one person as more important than another, or one profession as more valuable than another, we begin to see all professions and labors as important to God and our serving God. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to see how these traditions blend together and are thus able to witness to them.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 71

EXERCISES IN THIS TRADITION:

1. *Take a good look at your life.*

Determine how all of the activities in which you are involved reflect the presence of God. Perhaps you are involved in Church, P.T.A., various clubs, sports, being a parent, or a local service organization. How do you reflect God's presence in those areas. Rate your effectiveness on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being the lowest.

Remember to not be too hard on yourself; most of us would not do very well.

2. *Open up to allow God to enter into your life.*

Do you have protective shields that keep God out of your life? If so, enter into prayer and ask God to help you remove those protections. See yourself as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

3. *Give Honor to God.*

Choose a day during the week to honor God for all God's blessings. We are very bold to honor others with special awards, Employee of the month, World's best mom or dad. Do your best to honor God and acknowledge God's presence in everything you do.

4. *Receive Holy Communion*

Before you receive Holy Communion think of the ways God has blessed you During the previous week. Think of the ways you have helped your family, your Co-works, your parents, or people in your social groups to experience God in their lives. As you receive the sacrament truly believe that Jesus is present.

5. *Practice Examen*

As you retire for the evening take some time to look back at those people whom you have encountered during the day. Have they represented the presence of Christ for you? The practice of Examen is a good way to evaluate your day and see where Christ was present and absent for you.⁷⁸

PRAYER METHODOLOGY: PRAYING WITH CREATION

The prayer methodology is one with which I am sure you are already familiar, but perhaps had not named. It is a beautiful time of praying with creation. This methodology was formally introduced to me by Andrew Dreitcer, Associate Professor of Spirituality at Claremont School of Theology.

1. First find a place where you feel creation reflects God's presence. Pray for God's presence to be with you.
2. What around you calls out to you? Are you attracted to something in particular?
3. Quietly rest in God's presence in that place. See it as a creation of God.
4. Gaze at this part of creation for an extended period of time – let it be a time of wonder, awe and openness to God's presence.
5. Theology. Enter into conversation with God about what you have noticed. Consider who was here before? Why is it of value to God? Does it have any relationship to the other things around it? Does it tell you anything about yourself?
6. Remain in that experience for as long as you desire.
7. Give thanks to God for creation⁷⁹

⁷⁸Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn. *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahway, NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 5.

⁷⁹ Andrew Dreitcer, class notes, "Prayer Traditions" 21 April 2006, Claremont School of Theology.

I chose this prayer for this tradition because it most fully aligns us with the whole of creation. It gives us an understanding that God is present in all of creation and God calls us into relationship with all that God has created. When we stop to contemplate creation we are asked to consider ourselves as part of that creation and our role in it. I felt this prayer methodology would open our hearts and minds to the presence of God.

Chapter 7

Evaluation

It is very difficult to evaluate the process of the classes without my being very critical of myself. There were two very distinct and different groupings for the study. The first group, *group A*, represented people who were specifically invited to be a part of this Spiritual Growth group. This group represented a younger, perhaps more open minded, set of participants. They seemed much more committed to the process and to their support for one another and their willingness to risk with one another. They took their responsibilities very seriously – attending regularly, trying the exercises, praying regularly, and openly discussing their experiences. As a result, they seemed to look forward to their times together. They began the process with a sense of anticipation for what they might gain from it and had very positive responses to it. While they represented a moderate variety in the age spectrum, they were still of employment age.

The second group, *group B*, represented people who had been meeting regularly for Bible study for approximately six years. I sought and received their permission to use this time for a spiritual growth program. They had a keen sense of the need and concerns for one another, and wanted to spend a portion of each class session checking on those who were ill, but their commitment to spiritual growth – in this format - was not as open as that of *group A*. Throughout their study sessions together, their participation almost exclusively consisted of those things that happened in class. There was very little commitment to study outside of class. Therefore, they did not attempt - with any degree of regularity - to practice the exercises that were suggested. The exception to this was within those three extra people who came specifically for this series of studies. They seemed to

be especially interested in getting as much as possible from the sessions. These three chose the morning session because the evening session (*group A*) did not fit into their time availability. This group consisted exclusively of retired individuals who enjoy their own fellowship and their Bible study, but were not as open to a different format.

Each class began with about 15 people but reduced itself to about 10 people through schedule conflicts and perhaps their feeling that this was not the right time or the right study for them. A group size of ten people was a little larger than the ideal, but small enough to accomplish much of what we wanted to accomplish. The sessions were ninety minutes in length for a period of seven weeks.

As I evaluate the process, I realize that I tried to cover far too much material in the time allotted. We were unable to spend an adequate amount of time in discussion of the events of the week or what people brought into the group. Each week there were assignments made in both exercises for the specific traditions as well as prayer methodologies offered for the participants to experience. The evaluation responses from the participants also suggested that we needed more time to process what had gone on during the previous weeks assignments. While I attempted to practice the prayer methods within the class time, it would have been good to spend time in asking questions and discussing their concerns.

While I attempted to order the sessions so that they did not seem rushed, I often found myself giving an overview of what was contained in the study materials rather than covering the material in depth. This was especially the case when we tried to enter into discussion about the subjects for the week. Each week all of the participants received a copy of the full study including all of the suggested experiential materials, but it would

have been helpful to have more time for them to attempt more than one or two exercises and to have tried the exercises for several days. Each exercise has the potential of growth and adjustment for individual practice. It is my hope that as they continue with some of the exercises they might find the adjustments they need to make them work comfortably.

The evaluations that were received were largely positive. Most of the participants, especially those who were in *group A*, were very positive and suggestive of ways to help this type of group grow more effectively. They suggested that the sessions need to be at least two hours in length and that they would stretch over a considerably longer time period – perhaps as long as 12 weeks.

Those who were in group B – those who had been gathering for previous years - made it very clear that while this program was all right, they would prefer regular Bible study focusing upon a book of the Bible. In retrospect I believe it was not completely fair to offer this study to an already established group that was accustomed to studying in a prescribed manner. We have often joked about how “Lutherans do not like change” and I think we experienced some of that resistance in this group.

My goal is to offer this course again in the Spring of 2008, but it will be scheduled for at least 12 weeks. Hopefully that will give us more time for discussion. I was very pleased that the majority of the participants, particularly in *group A*, indicated that they would be open to participating again when the classes are offered.

The groups were also made up of both men and women- including a few husbands and wives. I have some concern that this make-up might have had some impact on the discussions. I believe it would be interesting to offer a series of classes for men only and/or women only to see the different dynamics that might emerge.

I was hopeful that *group A* might see themselves bonding in such a way that they would continue – at least for a while. Unfortunately, and for a variety of reasons, that did not happen. *Group B* has continued with their study of the Bible. They are completely bonded together.

It has been interesting that some of those who participated, particularly from *group A*, have volunteered for other areas of ministry and two have been elected to the Congregational Council. Another lady has taken major leadership in the worship life of the congregation. She is serving as cantor for Lenten mid-week services and has become involved in another Bible study. We will have to wait and see how other avenues of service are manifested.

Conclusion

This has been a long and involved process. Over the past four years there has been a lot of preparation and study culminating in the offering of a program for developing a sense of spirituality for a local congregation. The path has moved through my critiquing and understanding of my own spiritual journey and how to put that into perspective as a parish pastor. What parts of that journey might come into play in helping others discover their spiritual paths? How has God molded them into the spiritual persons they are now? This quest involves a great deal of risk on the part of the seeker. One does not come away from such an investigation without being changed in some way. Even if one is self-protective and not willing to risk publicly sharing his or her journey, that one is still encouraged to examine the journey. And by doing so, quite often realizes that the journey was never alone. God is there leading, chiding, encouraging, loving, and re-directing so that one might reflect the light that is God.

I believe this journey has been wonderful for me. I pray that it has been a source of enlightenment for others who have experienced my teachings, prayers, visitation, and preaching. On numerous occasions, I have received encouragement from parishioners that my sermons have greatly improved as far as spiritual content was concerned. Perhaps the congregation has also grown through this process as well.

The Spiritual Development classes that were offered were successful, even if they were not exactly what I expected them to be. We all gained some spiritual insight as we studied and talked together – and especially as we practiced the exercises both together and individually. Some gleanings were made so that the next time the classes are offered

there will be some adjustments and perhaps a different kind of commitment to the process of spiritual growth.

I am still convinced that the church, especially my own denomination, must learn to grow “from the inside out”, that is, to grow with a deeper insight to the workings of the Holy Spirit in the lives of every individual. We are all temples of God’s Spirit. God calls us into an intimate relationship with God’s self. It is incumbent upon each and every Christian to nurture that relationship so that we become channels through which the love of God flows toward all of God’s people.

It is my hope that the program developed in this project might be adapted by other congregations and put to use for their own spiritual development.

APPENDIX

SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP
AN EVALUATION

Thank you for your participation during these past six weeks in our Spiritual Growth Groups. It has been my honor to lead these sessions. Now I would ask a favor of you. Below are some evaluation questions that will help me determine how effective these sessions have been as well as a guide for framing the next classes. Would you please take a few moments and give me your honest (kind) responses to the following questions.

1. Were the sessions helpful for your spiritual growth?
2. What would you say was the most helpful for you?
3. What would you say was the least helpful for you?
4. When we looked at the wheel on the first session, do you think you have grown in any of the areas that you determined you were weakest in? In what areas? (see wheel on back side)
5. Was the setting conducive to what we were trying to accomplish?
6. When this course is offered again, what suggestions would have to improve it? What would you INCLUDE? What would you EXCLUDE?
7. If some form of "Spirituality" classes were to be offered again, would you see them as valuable for you?
8. Would you be willing to recommend this course for others?

THANKS FOR BEING A BLESSING IN MY LIFE!

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